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JULY 2001

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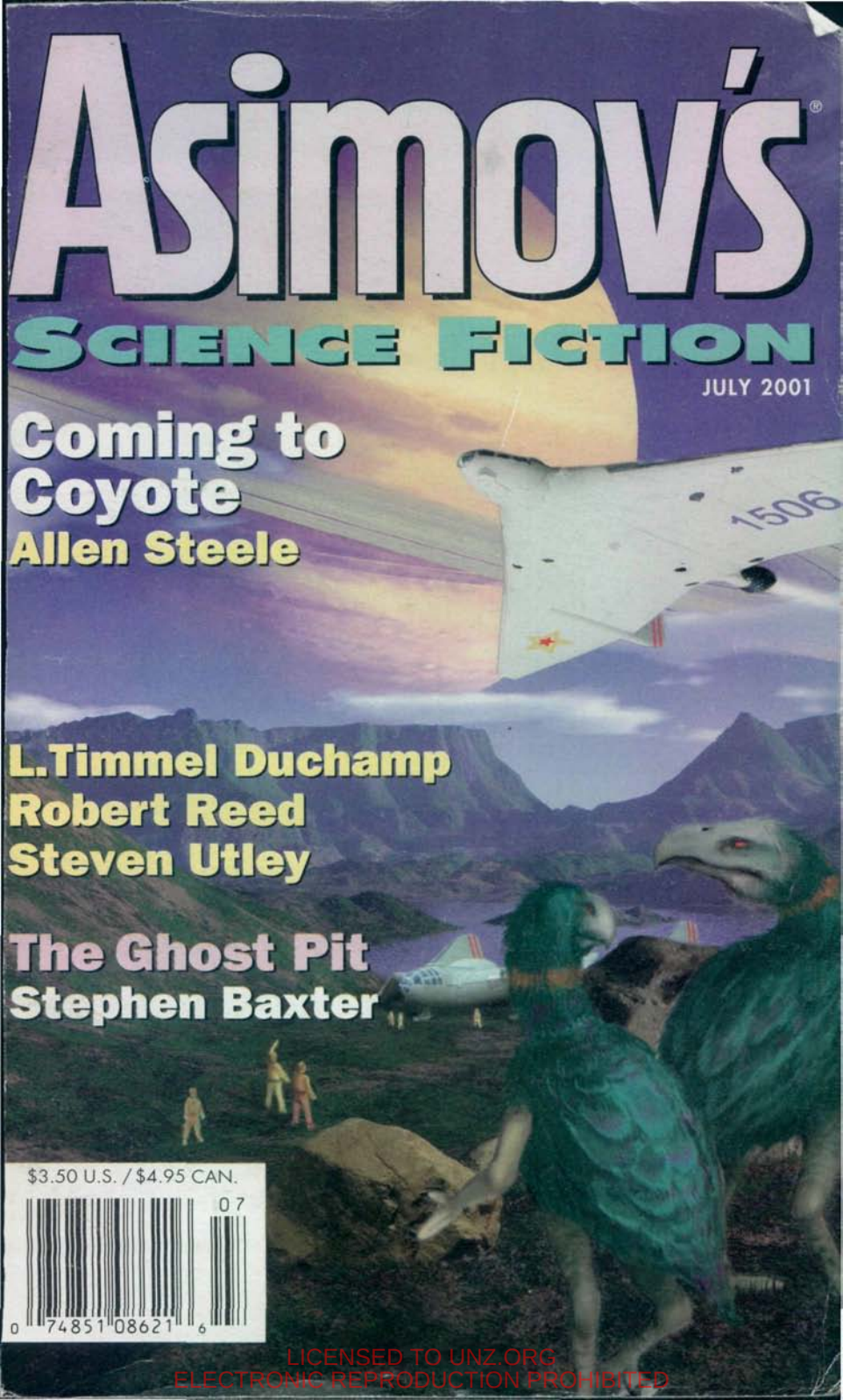

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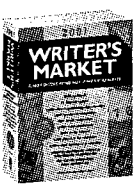

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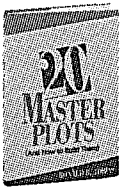

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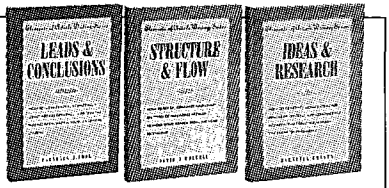

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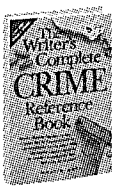

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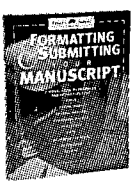

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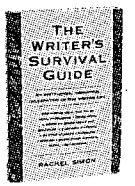

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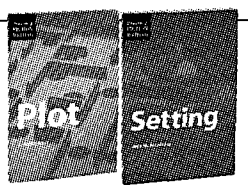

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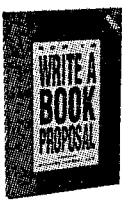

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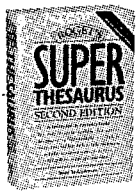

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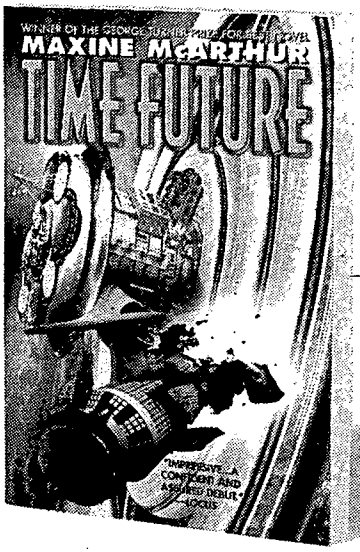
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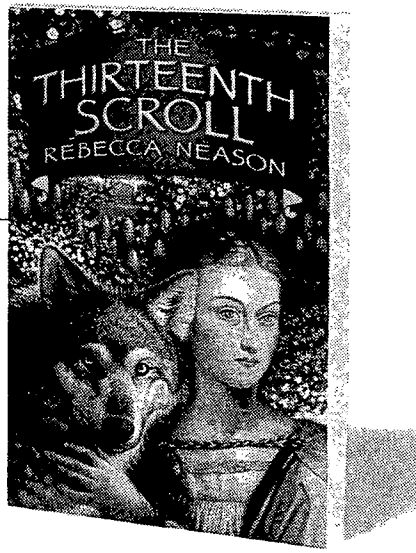

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

CAUSE AND EFFECT

One of the most insightful attempts to define science fiction ever made was an essay called "Social Science Fiction" by—who else?—Isaac Asimov, written in 1953 for Reginald Bretnor's superb book, *Modern Science Fiction.* Isaac had this to say, back then:

Let us suppose it is 1880 and we have a series of three writers who are each interested in writing a story of the future about an imaginary vehicle that can move without horses by some internal source of power; a horseless carriage, in other words. We might even make up a word and call it an automobile.

Writer X spends most of his time describing how the machine would run, explaining the workings of an internal-combustion engine, painting a word-picture of the struggles of the inventor, who after numerous failures, comes up with a successful model. The climax of the yarn is the drama of the machine, chugging its way along at the gigantic speed of twenty miles an hour between a double crowd of cheering admirers, possibly beating a horse and carriage which have been challenged to a race. This is gadget science fiction.

Writer Y invents the automobile in a hurry, but now there is a gang of ruthless crooks intent on stealing this valuable invention. First they steal the inventor's beautiful daughter, whom they threaten with every dire eventuality but rape (in these adventure stories, girls exist to be rescued and have no other uses). The inventor's young assistant goes to the rescue. He can accomplish his purpose only by the use of the newly invented automobile. He dashes into the desert at an unheard of speed of twenty miles an hour to pick up the girl who otherwise would have died of thirst if he had relied on a horse, however rapid and sustained the horse's gallop. This is adventure science fiction.

Writer Z has the automobile already perfected. A society exists in which it is already a problem. Because of the automobile, a gigantic oil industry has grown up, highways have been paved across the nation, America has become a land of travelers, cities have spread out into suburbs, and—what do we do about automobile accidents? Men, women, and children are being killed by automobiles faster than by artillery shells or airplane bombs. What can be done? What is the solution? This is social science fiction.

I leave it to the reader to decide which is the most mature and which (this is 1880, remember) is the most socially significant. Keep in mind the fact that social science fiction is not easy to write. It is easy to predict an automobile in 1880; it is very hard to predict a traffic problem. The former is really only an extrapolation of the railroad.

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The latter is something completely novel and unexpected.

I have just been reading an astonishing SF novel by a writer whose work is probably unfamiliar to most of you: José Saramago, who is Portuguese. The novel is called *Blindness* (Harvest paperbacks, $14) and it is a stunning exemplar of Asimovian social science fiction: an examination of the consequences for society of a single astounding deviation from our established reality.

Perhaps the book is really fantasy rather than science fiction, since Saramago's premise is not an easy one to accept at face value, and he makes no attempt to provide a scientific rationale for it. He simply states it, turns it loose to generate his plot, and lets it run its course, without ever attempting to offer any sort of explanation of how such a thing might have happened. No matter. Even if the primary situation is basically fantastic, his handling of it is purely science-fictional, the steady and meticulous examination of the consequences—*all* of them—of a single remarkable departure from the reality we know. As the author himself said in an interview a couple of years ago, "There is not much imagination in *Blindness*, just the systematic application of the relation of cause and effect."

He states his speculative situation on the first page: in the midst of heavy urban traffic (the city is never mentioned; perhaps it is Lisbon) the car at the head of the middle lane stops for a traffic light and remains halted when the light turns green. Horns begin to honk. Drivers get out of their cars to investigate. A breakdown of some sort? No. The driver inside the stopped car shouts, "I am blind, I am blind." Between one moment and the next he has lost his vision. The only thing he can see is a white glow.

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"These things happen," a woman says. "It will pass. Sometimes it's nerves." A good Samaritan offers to drive the hapless man home, and does, taking him to his nearby apartment and leaving him there. (And stealing his car when he departs.) The man stumbles around the apartment in bewilderment. His wife comes home: he explains his predicament. Hastily she leafs through the telephone book, finds an eye doctor, hails a taxi when she discovers the car is missing, and brings him to the doctor's office.

Six or seven patients are waiting there already—an old man with cataracts, a boy with a squint, a young woman with conjunctivitis, and several more. But so strange is the case of the driver who went blind at the wheel of his car that the doctor orders him shown immediately into the consulting room while the others wait. He examines the man's eyes and can find nothing organically wrong. "Your blindness at this moment defies explanation," he tells the man. In the evening, at home, he discusses the case with his wife and searches through his reference books without success.

By morning, several other cases of the same sort of blindness—the white glow, not the usual blackness that loss of vision brings—have been reported throughout the city. It begins to become apparent that a baffling epidemic of blindness has begun.

At this point let's look at those Asimovian categories again. The writer of gadget science fiction (the Hugo Gernsback school of SF) would halt the story after the situation has been stated so that he can deliver a long lecture on the mechanics of vision. The rest of the tale would show the steady spreading of this inexplicable plague of blindness and would depict a brilliant young medical researcher's ultimately triumphant struggle to find a cure.

As for the writer of adventure SF (the pulp-magazine school of the 1940s), he would let us know fairly quickly that the blindness is the result of a beam being flashed down from space by an invading army of aliens. With all of Earth demoralized by the onset of such instant blindness, it will be an easy matter for the monsters from space to achieve its conquest—but for the heroic efforts of a band of brave men who just happened to be in a subterranean cave at the time of the attack, and who now emerge, aided by hastily improvised blindness shields, to wage a valiant war of defense that ends in the total rout of the invaders.

Whereas the writer of social science fiction would examine in meticulous detail the cascading consequences of the one strange event that set his story in motion, looking at them with regard to the effects that such an event might have on human society.

And that is exactly what José Saramago does. For it turns out that the earliest victims of the blindness can all be linked directly to the first man, the rush-hour driver. The Samaritan who steals his car goes blind. Likewise the taxi driver who takes the first blind man and his wife to the eye doctor, and the first blind man's wife. So do the patients in the eye doctor's waiting room, the squinting boy and the man with the eye patch and the rest. *The eye doctor himself loses his vision.* Of all those who come in contact with the first blind man or the earliest group of victims, only the doctor's wife, for some miraculous reason, retains her sight.

The local officials instantly conclude that the blindness is contagious, transmitted by direct contact. Since no one understands what causes it, that's as reasonable a theory as any; and so, on grounds of "public safety," the early victims are rounded up and confined, under guard, in an

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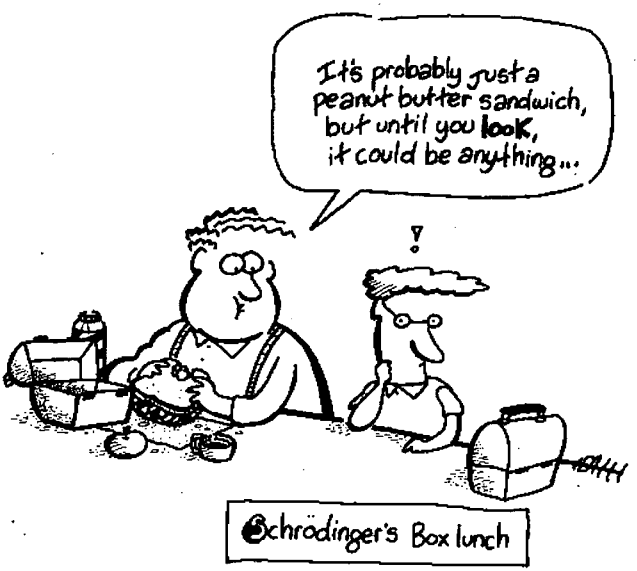
abandoned mental hospital that happens to be available. This is Saramago's jumping-off point for an examination of the convergence of paranoia and totalitarianism in modern civilization. Step by step he shows us the return to a state of primitive nature within and without the camp—fear of the blindness drives these otherwise civilized people into a state approaching savagery in the name of self-defense, and only a few inspired leaders retain enough sanity to hold some shreds of civilization together. And as the blindness continues to spread until society has collapsed altogether, we realize that Saramago has been writing not only a classic end-of-the-world novel but also an allegory of the failures of human communication in daily life.

It is a remorseless, harrowing novel. You are drawn along from one grim situation to another, each of them utterly plausible *within the context of the defined situation,* and depicted in merciless and wholly believable detail. And when the ending comes—it is more of a release than a real ending—you are left stunned by the power of the book you have just read.

If the novel is as good as all that, though, why was it not a Hugo or Nebula nominee in the year of its publication? Why are you hearing about it now, probably, for the first time?

Because José Saramago is not a science-fiction writer, simply a writer who deviated into a sort of science fiction for this one magnificent novel. But, though he has no Hugos or Nebulas to his credit, it is not as though his great literary accomplishments have gone completely unnoticed in the world beyond the confines of the SF readership. In October, 1998—a couple of years after the publication of *Blindness*—José Saramago was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. O



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Sheila Williams

The 2001 ISAAC ASIMOV AWARD

Isaac Asimov Award winners and judges: Lena DeTar, Sarah Jane Elliott, Rick Wilber, Sheila Williams, Elan Ruskin, and Mark Jacobsen.

Photo credit: Beth Gwinn

I returned to beautiful Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, for my ninth Conference on the Fantastic to bestow the Isaac Asimov award for Undergraduate Excellence in Science Fiction and Fantasy Short Story Writing.

Each year, Asimov Award Administrator and co-judge Rick Wilber, removes all names from the submissions to the contest. Gardner Dozois and I give the finalists a blind read and then we choose the winners. Much to our surprise, this year's group of finalists was almost a rerun of last year's. The four winners from 2000 had spent the past year building their friendship and workshopping their stories together on the internet. When the dust cleared, the three eligible contestants had each moved up a notch. Our winner, and last year's first runner-up Mark Jacobsen, is a junior at the United States Air Force Academy studying aeronautical engineering. He plans to spend the next year and a half at the NASA Jet Propulsion Lab doing research on planned Europa missions. When he leaves school, Mark hopes to find himself at the cutting edge of the space program. The In-

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ternational Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, which co-sponsors the award with *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, flew the author in for an all-expense paid weekend. At a banquet on Saturday, March 24, 2001, I presented Mark with a certificate and a check for $500 from the magazine for his story "Conquering Europa."

Last year's second-runner-up Lena DeTar—a junior at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota—moved up a level with her tale "Perfect Authentic Cadence." She will receive a two-year complimentary subscription to *Asimov's* for the story. Lena also received an honorable mention for a second submission, "Obon."

Elan Ruskin, one of last year's honorable mentions, moved into second runner-up, with his darkly funny tale of "Small Mercies." Elan is just about to graduate from the University of Pennsylvania where he has been studying computer science engineering.

I'm happy to say that we did have one delightful new finalist. Sarah Jane Elliott, a senior at Victoria University at the University of Toronto received an honorable mention for "To Soothe the Savage Beast."

We hope to see lots of new faces next year, but since two of our finalists are juniors, we'd be thrilled to have them back, too.

Authors in attendance included Brian Aldiss, Suzy McKee Charnas, John Crowley, Nick Dichario, Thomas M. Disch, Stephen R. Donaldson, Andy Duncan, Neil Gaiman, Kathleen Ann Goonan, Joe Haldeman, Elizabeth Hand, Nalo Hopkinson, John Kessel, Daniel Keyes, David Lunde, Patricia McKillip, Peter Straub, and Tim Sullivan.

Last year's winner, Beth Adele Long, returned to the conference as an author. Beth has revised her story, "Repeating Patterns." It can be found on our website—*www.asimovs.com.*

Asimov's is proud to support these academic awards with IAFA. The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts is a worldwide network of scholars, educators, writers, artists, filmmakers, critics, editors, publishers, and performers who share an interest in studying and celebrating the fantastic in all art forms, disciplines, and media. The award is also supported by the School of Mass Communications at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida.

We are now actively looking for next year's winner. The deadline for submissions is December 15, 2001. All full-time undergraduate students at any accredited university or college are eligible. Stories must be in English, and should run from 1,000 to 10,000 words. No submission can be returned, and all stories must be previously unpublished and unsold. There is a $10 entry fee, with up to three stories accepted for each fee paid. Checks should be made out to the Asimov Award. There is no limit to the number of submissions from each writer. Each submission must include the writer's name, address, phone number, and college or university on the cover sheet, but please remove your name from the manuscript.

Before entering the contest, please contact Rick Wilber for more information, rules, and manuscript guidelines. Rick can be reached care of:

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Next year's winner will be announced at the 2002 Conference on the Fantastic, in the pages of *Asimov's Science Fiction magazine,* and on our website. ○

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

KETCHUP

catching up

It's been almost a year and a half since I moved from the little city of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to the deep woods of Nottingham (population 3,300). I now live on a dirt road that winds for about a mile through hemlocks, white pines, birches, oaks, and maples down to a lake. And I *do* mean down—if my driveway were a ski slope, it would be marked with a black diamond. You may recall a column I wrote in April of last year in which I whined about how my dialup internet connection speed dropped from just under 56 kbs in town to just over 28 kbs out here in the boondocks. It was as if I had been exiled to 1997! Well, it's time to play some catch up.

I was actually kind of surprised when ATT brought its Roadrunner cable modem service to this neck of the woods last fall. Most of the folks on our road are summer people; they had to string a lot of cable to wire just a handful of year-round houses. Of course, I immediately jumped at the chance to go broadband; researching a column on the net in slomo is no fun. The trouble started because I wanted to share the fast new connection with my wife; we each have our own computer. I suppose I could have bought *two* of the pricey—about $250—cable modems from Circuit City and paid ATT for *two* internet connections at $30 a month, but I thought I had a simpler and cheaper solution: I'd build a home network.

Home networks are happening, and it isn't hard to see why. Not only are they the most sensible way to share a broadband connection, but you can also share scanners and printers and just about anything you have on your hard drive or that is hanging off the back of your CPU. There are three ways to go, conventional Ethernet, phone line and wireless. Conventional is the cheapest and fastest way to connect computers, but you'll have to string wire. You can use your existing phone lines if they've been installed correctly—not a given, believe me! Wireless is the slowest and most expensive, but the most convenient.

network hell

I worried as I watched myself type the preceding that you might be lulled into thinking I'm an expert in these matters. Nothing could be further from the truth! I have no idea how to install an Ethernet or wireless network and based on my experience struggling with our new phone line network, I would have to classify myself as somewhat worse than a bumbling incompetent.

Here are some of the things that went wrong with my installation: one of those teensy little wires inside the phone jack was crossed in my office—okay, so I strung those myself. Windows 95 can address only one Ethernet card and it doesn't really support USB. Windows 95

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couldn't see the Netgear PCI card and then when it did, it crashed. The network cards in each of our two computers couldn't see each other. Thanks to an obscure program called WINIPCFG, I learned more than I really wanted to know about protocol stacks and TCP/IP and NetBEUI. Meanwhile, all the installation wizards I tried seemed to have flunked out of Hogwarts. The network was up for maybe a week, but then I installed a firewall that brought it down again. Enough geeking? On a more personal note, when I called Netgear's tech support line, the wait was usually between ten and twenty minutes before I spoke to a human being, who would give me something to try and then ring off before I could see if it worked or not. Mostly it didn't.

It took about four months from the day I had the cable modem installed to the day I had a network that ran fairly reliably. In that time, I gave up on my Windows 95 computer and bought a new one with Windows 98. If it hadn't been for all my network troubles, I probably would have put up with the old box for at least six months, or maybe a year.

To anyone interested in installing any kind of home network, my advice is to consider getting professional help. Someday the network marketers' fantasy of streamlined installation, automated wizards and 24/7 tech support may become fact, but I'm afraid that might well be the day after we launch our first faster-than-light starship. And if you insist on building a network yourself, all I can say is "Be afraid. Be very afraid."

So, you may be wondering, was broadband worth all this pain and suffering? Oh my, *yes*. I find that connecting at twenty to thirty times my old dial-up speed has changed my experience of the net profoundly. Web pages don't merely load with broadband; they *snap* to attention. I can watch movies now and listen to music. And the net is always just a click away, which is a difference in convenience something like getting your water from a hand pump as opposed to turning on a faucet.

By the way, if you're wondering just how fast your current connection is, check out the test at **DSLreports.com** <*http://www.dslreports.com/stest*>. When you're done, backtrack to the home page. DSLreports.com can help you find and rate broadband providers in your area, answer your questions about the different types of service and suggest tweaks to squeeze more speed out of your connection. DSL stands for *D*igital *S*ubscriber *L*ine, another technology for providing fast internet access, but DSLreports.com does a great job of reporting on *all* broadband services.

extra catch up

In the same issue in which I bemoaned my sluggish net connection, I also wrote that I was changing my default search engine from **Excite** <*http://www.excite.com*> to **Dogpile** <*http://www.dogpile.com*>. Although I still use Dogpile as a backup—it is particularly handy for quick checks of the Usenet—I now rely on **Google** <*http://www.google.com/*>. There's a lot to like about this site, starting with its spare home page. It isn't about giving you a free email account or bringing you the latest basketball scores or helping you get a date; it's about finding stuff on the world wide web, *period*. And it does its work very well indeed, thanks to clever software that employs link popularity as a way to determine search relevance. The more sites that link to a site, the higher up it appears on the list of search results. For example, when I asked Google to search for science fiction, its top five sites were **The Linköping Science**

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Fiction & Fantasy Archive <*http://www2.lysator.liu.se/sf_archive/sf_main.html*>, **The Science Fiction Resource Guide** <*http://sflovers.rutgers.edu/SFRG/*>, **Scifi.com** <*http://www.scifi.com/*> **The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, Inc.** <*http://www.sfwa.org/*>, and **The SF Site** <*http://www.sfsite.com/*>, which are, in fact, five of the very best science fiction sites. Earlier this year, Google won the Outstanding Search Service Award and Most Webmaster Friendly Award from **Search Engine Watch** <*http://www.searchenginewatch.com/*>.

Speaking of which, you should definitely click over to Search Engine Watch some time, because, good as it is, Google is not the last word in web searching. Here is a site that lists and rates search engines, and is particularly good at pointing you to places where you can search the "deep web," those precincts that general search engines have yet to discover. For example, there were two winners of Search Engine Watch's best Meta Search engine: my old favorite Dogpile and **Ixquick** <*http://www.ixquick.com/*>, which I had never heard of but which I found well worth a visit. I did a quick ego-surf of Ixquick—you will recall that ego-surfing involves typing one's own name into a search engine—and came across a couple of pages that I, as a James Patrick Kelly completist, hadn't seen before. Winner for best Specialty Search Engine was **Moreover** <*http://www.moreover.com*>, a news search engine. I can recommend Moreover not only to news junkies but to anyone doing research into what's happening now. Traditional search engines are inept when it comes to covering current events and sites like **CNN.com** <*http://www.cnn.com/*> are not necessarily the answer when it comes to hunting down yesterday's headlines.

the best

Finally, let's catch up with one of the best new SF sites on the web. In April of last year, the same month as my column on search engines and slow connections was published, I had an email from one Mark Watson, who invited me to click his site **Best SF** <*http://www.bestsf.net/*>. Although I liked what I saw, Best SF was clearly a work in progress and I wrote back to tell him that I hoped he could make some improvements and that I would catch up with him in a future column. Well, the future is now and I'm pleased to say that Best SF is not hyperbole when it comes to describing this site. Actually it's three sites in one: a database of some eight hundred stories that have been reprinted in various Best of the Year collections, a gateway to three hundred stories that are available for downloading from the web and a review section in which Mark dissects the latest offerings from a variety of publications. When Mark first contacted me, Best SF consisted of the database only and it was woefully incomplete. But aside from the fact that the database would make a wonderful tool for readers, what attracted me were brief summaries of the stories, usually no more than a sentence or two. Most are just straightforward description—what Hollywood types might call a story's high concept—but some read like Zen koans, some like one-liners, and a few bite deeper in a handful of words than more verbose critics could do in pages. Here's how he describes Connie Willis' Hugo winning "Death on the Nile": "SF? Horror? Crime? Fantasy? Agatha Christie? All of these, and more." The gateway is a useful resource for finding new stories to read.

continued on page 85

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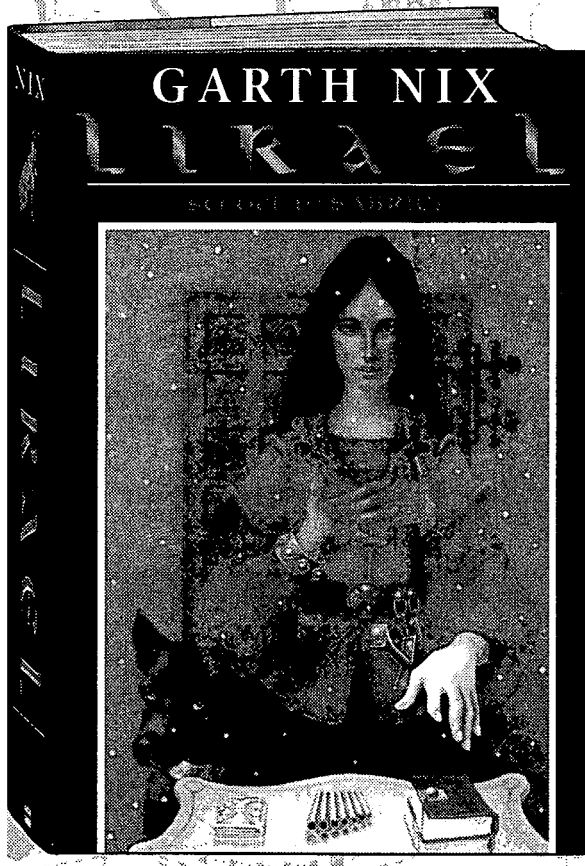

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THE MYSTERY OF LAURA MOLSON

L. Timmel Duchamp

L. Timmel Duchamp has sold more than 250,000 words of short fiction over the last decade. Her work has been a finalist for both the Nebula and the Sturgeon awards, and she has been short-listed for the Tiptree Award three times. She keeps a website at <*http://www.halcyon.com/ltimmel/*>.

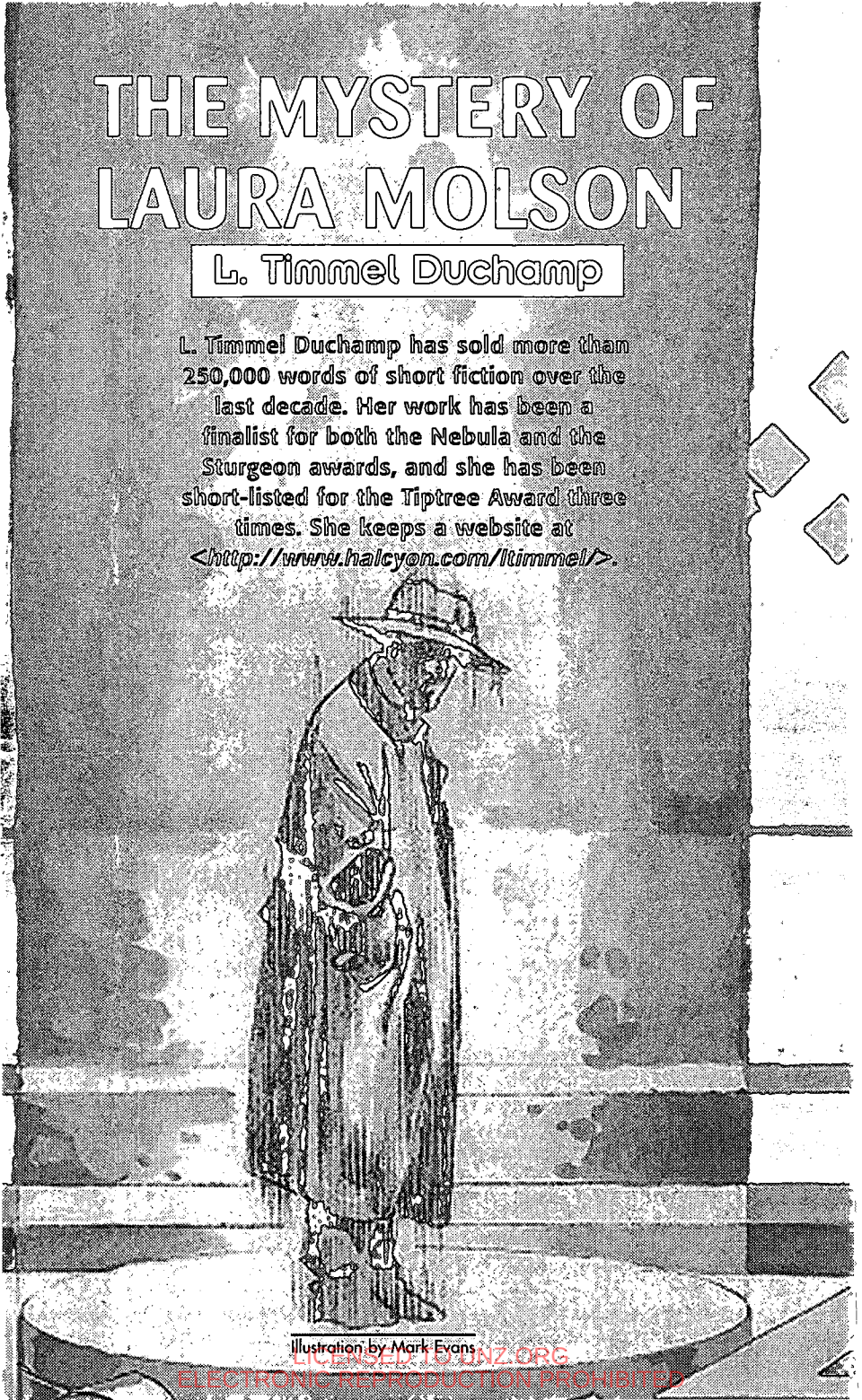

Illustration by Mark Evans

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No one could ever have accused Burton Childers of being into work. And yet, he'd tried a lot of different *kinds* of it, which gave him a certain range of experience, surfing and sampling occupations, that most guys his age lacked. Among the few dozen occupations Burt had sampled (and rejected) was that of moderating electronic social rituals. So when his mother began singing a variation on the theme of the Great Tragedy of her boss's untimely death, Burt could see the punchline coming a pilot's mile off. Every time his mother paused for Burt's contribution, he said (sardonically, though she didn't seem to notice this): "Yeah." "Right." "Of *course*." No question, she was hoping to soften him up for the squeeze her sentimental emoting was a mere windup to.

And *then* she interrupted her panegyric. "You're *sure* you don't want a glass of this wine? It's nicely oakey with a touch of nicoise olive about it."

No *way* he was going to share a cozy glass of wine in tribute to the old bag's greatness. He crossed his arms over his chest and gave her a stern, scolding frown. "My take on this, Ma, is, like, the lady was your *boss*. You know what I'm saying?"

"The lady was my *friend*." His mother held her glass in both lavishly beringed hands and stared sadly into the mere inch left in its body. "Laura had too much class to play the boss card on a routine basis. Sure, she got the glory and reaped the profits—which she *deserved,* brilliant as she was—but we were co-workers, Burt. Like sisters, she always said. And god knows people often enough would say it was like we were telepathic, the way we worked so well together."

"Yeah. Like, you knew what she wanted you to do without her having to tell you. That's real teamwork, all right."

His mother reached for the bottle and poured. "So anyway, to go back to the arrangements. It was Lennie's idea that the company hire Profile.com to do the commemoration web-site. Only the best, Lennie wants."

Burt considered it his mission in life to provide a certain kind of insight to his friends, associates, and relatives. "And of course it will be great for business," he said helpfully. "A cache of gorgeous pictures of a scantily clad *femme* of an unguessable age will draw megahits to a site full of ad-bombs for all the lady's virtual fashions. It'll be like a million-dollar ad campaign almost for free. I've got to say this for Lennie Molson, the guy's always been clear about the bottom line." He was skating on thin ice, Burt knew, but he couldn't resist. It was precisely because his mother imagined he was ignorant of her on-again-off-again affair with Lennie that he could get away with taking a poke at the jerk.

His mother put her glass down on the table with a firm, sharp click. "No one can say Lennie didn't love her a great deal."

Something behind her sad gray eyes looked out at him. Bitterness? No, he couldn't imagine her bitter. Something else, something stark, something knowing. Something that made him shiver.

Burt shoved his chair away from the table and rocked back on its hind legs. Laura Molson had stayed with Lennie Molson because it would have played hell with the bottom line if she'd had to part with one-half of her majority of VirtualFashion.com's shares. Probably she'd have had to take the company public, which she seriously hadn't wanted to do. Lennie'd stayed with Laura because it suited *his* bottom line, too—and because staying married to Laura meant never having to get hitched to someone else (who'd

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then want *her* cut of the loot). It was a marriage, Burt thought, that had literally been money in the bank.

"If I had a nickel for every time in your life I've asked you not to *do* that, Burt, I'd be a bleeping millionaire."

Burt let the chair rock back forward with the satisfying, jolting crash that he always found almost as gratifying as the sense of physical expansion he got from rocking back. Why *did* it irritate her so much, anyway? Though at the moment, of course, she was trying hard *not* to be irritated since she was only a few sentences short of hitting him up for the favor.

"So then we got to talking about how *awful* the moderators for e-wakes can be, how there isn't a single mortuary known for providing a decently sensitive moderator. Which was when I remembered what a nice job you did for Jase's wake. Honey, you were so quick on your feet, and tactful, and the way you broke up that flame war before it spoiled everything—"

"Ma, there *was* no flame war." Burt thought with pride of how he'd threatened to fly East to Cleveland to kick Cousin Jon's balls into Viagra-proof paste if the little prick didn't back off his sniping insinuations about Cousin Chelsea. "But you know, that was dealing with relatives. You got to understand, it's a whole other can of worms, dealing with business acquaintances. You probably would have thought the job I did for the mortuaries sucked. Like, the hired moderator has only one tool at his disposal, namely censorship. And because the hired gun doesn't know the history of the personalities involved, things can get out of hand before he realizes it."

"You know the personalities involved here. I mean, you've known Laura Molson almost all your life. She's done so much for you. And god knows I've yakked your ears off talking about her and Lennie and their circle of friends. Honey, even you have to admit she's pretty close to being *family*."

Now that she'd finally made it up to the pass, it was time to cut her off quick, before she galloped into the momentum of a fast, downhill run. "Whoa, Ma. Just wait a minute. If you're suggesting that I moderate her wake, I want you to get that idea right out of your head pronto. No way I'm getting involved in that. Lennie Molson can stand to pay a mortuary for that service. It's not like he's hurting for moolah."

"It's not the money, Burt." Carefully she set her glass down on the table, looked Burt straight in the eye, and . . . sighed. "I've already promised him you would do it, honey."

Burt hated it when his mother sighed. And this sigh was particularly heavy. It compelled him to gaze for too long into her eyes. Seeing what was in her eyes made him want to look away, even though he knew looking away, under such circumstances, was not allowed.

Burt did a quick analysis of his mother's bottom line. First, her "promise" was probably part of a bid to make herself indispensable to Lennie's comfortably taking control of the business. Second, she was probably thinking about how he, Burt, owed her—and owed Laura. She had gone to Laura to beg a loan when Burt got so far into debt he was mere days from being sentenced to a debtor's indenture. Burt swallowed. In his mother's eyes he read a question: was she going to have to bring "all that" up to twist his arm? Or was he going to make nice, like a good boy?

Burt reached for the empty glass and poured out the half-glass remaining in the bottle. "All right, Ma," he said. "But don't blame me if it doesn't all go smooth as silk. If you do an around-the-clock wake, there'll have to be at least three operators besides me, you know. And since this will be a one-time

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thing, I won't be able to answer for everything the other operators do." He lifted the glass to his nose and sniffed. Good stuff; the kind he could never afford to buy for himself. "And the other thing is, suicide makes it all a lot more touchy. You wouldn't believe how many weirdoes crawl out of the woodwork to join wakes for suicides. That alone will up the volume of messages to be sorted—unless you decide to keep the list private and closed to people Lennie doesn't okay." Burt knew Lennie would never agree to *that*. The whole PR angle would be lost if the wake went private. Obviously Lennie was hoping for some kind of celebrity event. Full media attendance and reportage. And every Tom, Dick, and Harry hoping their post out of all the posts made would be chosen as an example of how greatly people "felt" the death. Burt took another sip and rolled it around in his mouth before swallowing. *Damn* it was good stuff.

Jen Jensen leaned her head against the back of the chair and closed her eyes. She looked, Burt thought, incredibly tired and strangely older than she had just a week ago, when he'd last seen her. She opened her eyes, glanced at Burt, then toyed with the largest and gaudiest of her rings. "There's another bottle of that in the wine rack, honey, if you want to go get it. And maybe you could bring another glass. Lennie said he'd be joining us. You can ask him about making the list private then."

Burt slammed out of the room in disgust. First she manipulated him into doing a major favor for that little twerp, and now he had to *socialize* with him. *Shit.* A pity it had been Laura who'd offed herself, instead of the little hubby. Laura had often been tedious and had cultivated a habit of being pretentious, but at least she hadn't made him want to barf at the sight of her, the way Mr. Jerk always did.

Burt commandeered Laura Molson's own luxe console at one end of the table while Dot set up an economy model at the other end. They would both have one screen and two tanks each, but Dot's tanks would be dollhouse-size compared with the half-life size of Laura's tanks. Apart from the difference in graphics-display capabilities, Laura's NC was basically the same as Dot's. Digital was a dead-end on the computing evolution map. "Faster than light-speed," people said about quantum computing, as compared with the mere light speed of digital nanocomputers. Until the handful of corporations that possessed quantum computing lost its virtual monopoly on it, though, digital was all that most folks were ever going to get. Even the Federal government's top security agencies were forced to lease QC services since the government hadn't been able to afford the exorbitant R&D costs itself. Burt knew people who'd done everything they could to get their hands on the controlled technology. Quantum computers were so tiny you'd think they'd be easy enough to thieve, but the corporations that owned them used quantum computing itself to protect them and gave users only remote access.

"Have you reviewed that list I gave you of close friends, associates, and relatives?" Burt asked Dot. The list of relatives was scandalously short, all of them Lennie's. Burt had asked Lennie about that, had suggested they publicize Laura's maiden name. But Lennie had refused, saying Laura had abandoned it on marriage—"that being the kind of gal Laura was"—and that it would not be disclosed publicly for "security reasons." Reading between the lines, Burt surmised that Lennie didn't want to risk possible claimants to Laura's fortune showing up. She had no children of her own, but surely she had brothers, sisters, cousins, nephews, and nieces. Maybe even *parents* for godsake.

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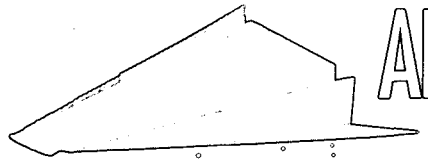
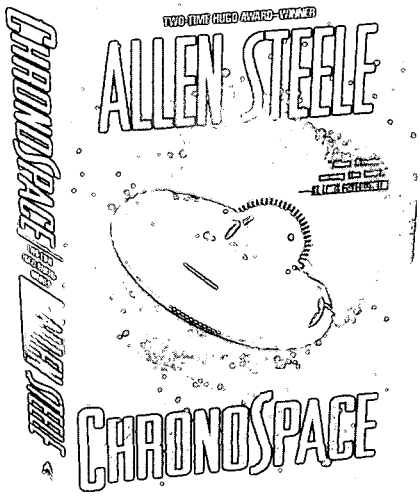
VOYAGES THROUGH TIME AND SEA FROM HUGO AWARD-WINNER

ALLEN STEELE





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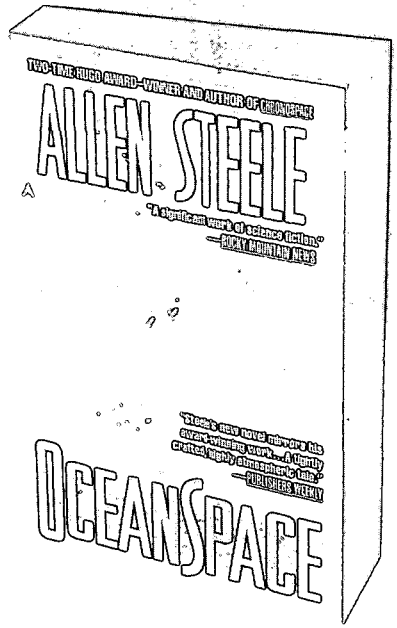
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Burt thought about how he'd never met his own father. Old Dad had skipped out on his mother a month before Burt's birth. He hoped his own father would make an appearance at his wake, if the old man were still alive at the time. Laura hadn't been so old that it wasn't likely she'd still have parents alive. Greed, Burt thought, had no limits. Anyone could see, even a mental defect like Lennie Molson, that if Laura's parents were still alive, letting them know about her death would be the humane thing to do.

"So you said the deceased was a suicide? Is there going to be a family member available in case we need to consult for the hard judgment calls?"

Man, Dot was going to be hard to take for an entire shift. Any kind of chirpiness bugged Burt, but Dot's went to extremes: her voice, her personal presentation, her eyes, even the way she tilted her head slightly first to one side and then to the other, as though she were a marvelously cute and intelligent little chipmunk expecting to go shares with a picnicker munching quiche and apples. Burt stared at the protocol he'd pulled down on his screen to make sure it hadn't changed in the eighteen months since he'd last moderated a social ritual. He said, not looking at Dot, "Not a family member, but someone who was close to the deceased." Lennie, when put on the spot, had asked Jen Jensen to take on the responsibility—even though all of Laura's known "relatives" were Lennie's.

Burt suspected his mother considered herself not an advisor on standby but his supervisor. She hadn't been able to restrain herself from suggesting that he think of the operators he had hired as coworkers rather than employees. It pissed him off, though he suspected she had a point. He'd blown several decent jobs because he'd screwed up directing subordinates' work. What was the good of being a boss, he always thought, if you had to persuade and flatter and manipulate your underlings? And how he hated those fucking workshops promoting so-called "effective management skills." His preference, as a consequence, was for working solo. Give him a job, he'd do it. Just don't ask him to be touchy-feely with subordinates and coworkers.

Burt said, "All right. It's ten minutes to showtime. And so far we have, let's see—oh shit, as of one minute ago, one thousand, six hundred fifty-four subscribers. Since it takes a minute max to subscribe, we can expect that's only the tip of the iceberg. My mo—um, Ms. Jensen, the advisor who'll be standing by, needs to take a gander at the list. Obviously, not all these subscribers are going to post. Most will just be lurking for the celebrity value of the event. Wanting to see if any Big Names offer up wake-like anecdotes and eulogies." As he talked, Burt emailed the list to the account his mother had dedicated to communications relating to the wake. "*Any* Big Names and celebrities we get, we send out pronto, regardless of content." Any celebrity-generated publicity was desirable, even if it bashed the old bag. Lennie had made a major deal about that.

"So what you're saying is, it's like a double standard for slander, spams, and flames, Burt?"

Burt's eyes, busy running down the list of subscribers, zoomed in on an enormous consecutively uploaded bloc with ELECTRA.com addresses. If even half of them posted, Lennie would be orgasmic. ELECTRA had to be the biggest PR agency for entertainment talent in the world. "Yeah, that's what I'm saying. So any posts from an ELECTRA.com address, for instance, can be put through without vetting." Burt couldn't complain about that—it would save them a lot of work, no question.

Five minutes before showtime, the list's mailbox was opened by the serv-

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er, and a cascade of message headers poured onto Burt's flatscreen. Burt forwarded copies to his mother, then looked for the names Lennie had listed as close friends and relatives, and for celebrities. It would be cool to have some headliners to start, since search engines would really draw in the hits, but it would look odd if, other than Lennie's opener, *all* the first posts were by people who couldn't claim anything more than a brief acquaintance (if that) with the deceased. "I'm lining up the first posts," Burt told Dot. "What I need you to do is to vet all the ones I'm marking with a question mark."

"Will do," Ms. Chirpy said cheerfully.

A particular name snagged his eye, and Burt stared at it as if it were the very person in the flesh. He swallowed convulsively as a massive flow of saliva flooded his mouth. "Mrs. Peel," he said only half under his breath. "Oh man."

Though he knew he shouldn't, he clicked on the message to view it in his left-hand tank. And there she was, that steely-eyed, heartbreaking, ball-busting babe, all in black in a Laura Molson Mrs. Peel Original, the fascinating center of a bevy of business-suited, bowler-hatted beautiful young men she used for wallpaper in all her music videos. Surrounded by her dancing boys and backed with her trademark drum beat, Mrs. Peel stared sad-eyed (but tough) at the viewer for an entire three seconds before opening her mouth to speak. What came out of her mouth, to Burt's surprise, was not speech but a song—a song about Laura Molson's genius, which, once it began, featured a continual stream of jump-shots and pans of the killer-sleek Mrs. Peel, whose virtual apparel morphed from one Laura Molson Mrs. Peel Original to another every few seconds of the song.

Even if it was Mrs. Peel singing and her dancing boys making pretty, the post was a blatant advertisement—one that would remind everyone who saw it that for every Mrs. Peel Original that VirtualFashion.com sold, Mrs. Peel herself would be given a cut of the royalty. Burt had been going to place Mrs. Peel's post second, after Lennie's, but now decided that Mrs. Peel or not, he'd better treat it like an ad and sandwich it about ten posts down from the top.

The dedicated phone glasses Burt's mother had given him twittered. A special one-off job, the phone could dial only a single pre-programmed number and would operate only for the duration of the task it was dedicated to supporting. Burt unfolded the glasses and shoved them onto his face. "Yeah, Ma, what is it? I don't have a lot of time to spare this sec."

On-screen, Jen Jensen looked nothing like the woman he'd seen only a few minutes ago, down the corridor, in her office. As an important employee of VirtualFashion.com, she had the very best image-mediator money could buy. Image-mediating software was, after all, VirtualFashion.com's product. Burt, on the other hand, bothered with image-mediation only when he didn't want to show his face to his caller and then he used a Donald Duck image and voice modulator. His mother, he knew, would be seeing a scruffy, grungy, real-time dude wearing clunky, ill-fitting spex.

"I've made a list ordering the opening ten messages, Burt. Take down these numbers." And she read off a list.

Without thinking, Burt entered them in his memopad. *Then* he got mad. "What, did you hire me so you could micromanage everything? Like why don't you come in here and do it all yourself?" He saw that she'd put Mrs. Peel's post third. "Oh man," he said. "You probably didn't even get a chance to look at any of them, did you." She couldn't have. *He* had only gotten to see

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one, himself. "That Mrs. Peel post is a blatant ad. It can't go third, unless you want to set a certain kind of tone, which I'm sure you don't. I'm putting it tenth, Ma." He clicked another celebrity message into the preview holotank, to make sure *it* wasn't an ad, too.

"All right, all right, honey. I have every confidence that you know what you're doing. It's just that Lennie asked me to take an active role in this thing, meaning he intends to hold me responsible if anything goes wrong."

Burt had no trouble believing *that*. "Trust me, Ma. I can handle this. I just need you on hand for the tough calls." For which he'd be *thrilled* to have her take responsibility. He just hoped she understood how tricky social-ritual lists could be.

The strange but all too familiar sense of being trapped in a dream state crept over Burt. He ran the messages at the fastest speed he could handle, anxious to keep the flow of posts swift enough so that someone just surfing and sampling would not get bored. That he had to play out every damned message before posting soon became clear: in that first half-hour alone he and Dot deleted as unacceptable roughly 9 percent of the messages received. Perhaps because the wake was for a minor celebrity who virtually dressed other, bigger celebrities, quite a few of the messages were scatalogically obscene speculations about and commentaries on the deceased's sex-life, body, and age (which had never been revealed to anyone and could not be found in any publicly accessible database). And then, of course, there were the many, many ads with which senders hoped to spam the list.

Forty-five minutes into the shift, Dot said, "Oh man. That's creepy. I don't know, Burt. Maybe you ought to look at this one."

"If it's unsuitable, delete it," Burt said, annoyed that he had to state the obvious. Any talking made it harder for him to handle the playback speed he needed to keep on top of the flow.

"I really think you should look at it. I mean, um, maybe we should give it to the police?"

Burt paused the message he was viewing and stared at her. "The police! Are you crazy? What the fuck do the police got to do with vetting messages?"

Dot's complexion flamed into a brilliant shade of tomato. "Uh, Burt. See, this message here claims Laura Molson was murdered. And the sender says he knows how it was done and who did it." Burt stared at her. When he didn't reply, she licked her lips and said, with increasing defensiveness, "Even if it's a crank message, we ought to turn it over to the police. Everyone knows that even when they get calls they suspect are crank, they investigate them."

Burt said, "We're so up to our gizzards in messages we don't have time for shit like that. Just delete the sucker and get on with the job you were hired to do." Burt hated busybodies. He might have known Ms. Chirpy would be one. Angrily he resumed viewing the message she'd interrupted.

"Uh, Burt? The message mentions you, I thought you should know. I mean, your last name is Childers, isn't it?"

Burt slammed his fist on the table so hard the flat-screen monitor jumped. "Shit! Whatever it is, I *don't* want to hear it, you got that, Dot? Delete the fucking message and get back to work, or you're out of here." He glared at her. Even as he said the words, he realized how screwed he would be if she took the dare and called his bluff.

Dot aimed her laser pointer at the holo in question and clicked. Though he still felt pissed-off at the amount of time Dot had wasted, he did enjoy a

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pleasurable surge of triumph at having faced her down. *Who says I'm not a good work director? I certainly got the upper hand over that little twerp.*

Half an hour later, though, Burt came across a message in his queue that he knew must have come from the sender of the first murder message. There was something sinister about it; even at high speed the effect of the message was creepy enough to make the hair on the back of his neck stand up. The graphics were simple—a double helix in constantly tilting rotation, a zoom in to a close-up of a small segment of it—the amino acids represented as enormous, brightly colored balls, green, red, yellow, blue—then a fat, black arrow shooting upward and offside to a second, newly appearing representation of a piece of biochemistry that was meaningless to Burt, followed by another arrow, pointing down to a schematic image of a brain, where more arrows and chemical formulae marched in bright, neat formations and then smartly circled the brain in a running data loop.

Burt scarcely made sense of the words flying rapidly past at a speed just a little lower-pitched than a squeak. Belatedly, he slowed the speed of the message's playout. "And then this virus inhibited serotonin uptake while simultaneously rapidly increasing dopamine production, with the result that Laura Molson became suddenly, shockingly depressed. Caught up in an inexplicable psychic nightmare, she shot herself. *Who would murder her?* anyone faced with these facts must ask. *Who benefits from her death?*"

The voice remained strangely, creepily soft and smooth, unmarked by emotion of any kind, as though dissociated from the significance of the words it spoke. "The person who will benefit the most is Burt Childers, followed by Burt Childers' mother, Jen Jensen, and Lennard Molson, in that order. Other than the murdered woman herself, only one person links Childers with Molson, and that is Jen Jensen. Jen Jensen, who had the most to lose if Laura Molson were to discover her affair with Lennard. Jen Jensen, known to be a devoted mother to her son. Jen Jensen, who knows Laura Molson's original identity."

The biochemistry graphics gave way to a trench-coated figure wearing a low-brimmed hat, standing in shadow. "I accuse Jen Jensen of Laura Molson's murder. Let a postmortem be done and the virus and its ravages be discovered. Let the truth not be covered up even one hour longer!"

The message left Burt shaking and so nauseated he thought he might vomit.

"That was more elaborate than the first one," Dot said softly. Burt almost jumped out of his skin. She was standing behind him; he had no idea how long she had been there.

Burt screeched. "Jesus! Don't sneak up on me like that!" He held his hand against his chest, where his heart galloped and raced with shock.

"So who do we call, Burt? 911? Or the nonemergency police line?"

Burt glared at her. "The client's not paying us to stand around gossiping about crank messages, 'specially not while a big volume is piling up, waiting to be sorted. So get the fuck back to your station and do what you're being paid to do."

Dot's eyes narrowed. "Not so fast, boyo. The cops take any kind of message to do with murder very, very seriously."

"I seen that movie, too," Burt said. "But this is real life. Now are you going to work, or aren't you? Say the word, and I'll get a replacement in here faster than it takes to reload a page of plaintext."

Dot's eyes widened. "You're planning on covering this up, aren't you?

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'Cause that name she mentions is *yours,* isn't it!" Dot took a step backward. "I can see why you don't want to notify the police."

"That's not why, you stupid bimbo." Burt's hands balled into fists. "The fact is, I *know* the message is crank. My mother would never kill anyone. And she certainly wouldn't kill her best friend on the totally wild idea that the lady might leave her billions to me, which she wouldn't, since she didn't even *like* me."

Dot stood with her arms folded across her chest, and Burt wondered how he could have been so totally out-to-lunch as to call such a dowdy, dumpy, ugly cow like her a *bimbo,* a characterization beyond doubt too good for someone any dude—even the geekiest dork—would have to be utterly desperate to even consider screwing. "You'd think you'd want to find out who sent the message, if it really is a lie like you say it is. I mean, this person is slinging mud on you and your mother." She sniffed. "But maybe you don't have that much faith in your mother after all. Or maybe you and she are in the murder together." She held out her hand in the halt position. "Okay, okay. You don't want to call the cops, that's cool. I understand, you gotta do what you gotta do. But by the same token, I've gotta do what I gotta do, boyo. Me, I'll just take it to the Big Listening Ear. No question, they'll pay me enough for sending such an *interesting* tip their way to make up for my losing this gig."

The Big Listening Ear! Burt sprang out of his chair and lunged for her, but Dot skipped backward, squealing. Burt started to follow—stretching the cord of the headset he wore to its furthest possible extent—but the door to the office opened and Burt's ultimate voice of authority thundered loudly, dropping him dead in his tracks. "Burton R. Childers! What the *hell* do you think you're doing? Why have you stopped passing messages on to the list? Are you crazy? Or just a common, garden-variety *idiot?*"

Oh man. Oh man. Oh man. Burt felt the beet-red tide of heat sweep inexorably upward, from his chest to his neck and then into his face, as embarrassment, confusion, and shame overwhelmed and disarticulated him: embarrassment to be caught by his mother with a worker out of control and for that worker—Ms. Holier-than-thou Chirpy herself—to be seeing his mother looking at him as if he'd totally flipped out; shame at the very thought of Ms. Chirpy confronting his mother with that murder bullshit; and confusion as to how to explain the mess away without dragging his mother into a situation she shouldn't have to deal with. "Uh, Ma—uh, we have a little problem here."

"Tell me something I don't know, Burt."

"This is your *mother,* Burt?" Ms. Chirpy asked. "You're Ms. Jensen?" Dot asked her directly.

"We got a crank message," Burt said quickly. "And this *person,* Dot, wants to take it to the Big Listening Ear. 'Cause that'll pay better than this gig."

"That's not what I said!" Dot got way indignant. "I said that if Burt didn't notify the police, I'd take it there. And that if he fired me because of it, I'd come out even with what the Big Listening Ear would pay. It's not for the *cash* that I'd do it!"

Jen Jensen looked from Dot to Burt and back to Dot. "*You,*" she said, pointing to Dot, "will come with me and sort through this mess." She looked at Burt. "And *you,* Mr. Childers, will get back to your station and get those messages flowing. *Capisce?*"

Burt shuddered. His mother had no idea what she was up against in Ms.

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Butter-wouldn't-melt-in-her-mouth Chirpy. But how could he do otherwise than to acquiesce? This was one piece of slander with the power to really hurt her. He knew his mother. He knew how tight she'd been with Laura Molson, all the old bag's faults notwithstanding. The full impact of the death hadn't yet hit her—he *knew* that. But *this*—this *canard* was unspeakably filthy. He felt like a powerless schmuck for not being able to protect her from it.

Burt resumed the message he'd paused. His mother was the client, after all, and therefore the boss. And besides, he eventually always did what his mother told him—especially when there was no other decent choice.

Though Jen Jensen stared intently at the message playing out in her 66" holotank, she focused most of her attention on the techie Burt hadn't been able to handle. It didn't take QC access, Jen thought, to grasp the immediately obvious fact that this bright and inquisitive temp was dangerously underemployed as a list moderator's assistant. Not that Burt would ever notice such a thing. But she had assumed she could rely on him to avoid hiring anyone conspicuously—or even subliminally—more intelligent than himself. She had glanced at the resumes of his selections cursorily; seeing that he had hired only native-born and -educated USians had offered assurance enough. She had gotten so used to such workers' apparently hopeless incompetence that it came as a shock to meet someone who would obviously shine with the proper training.

Be all that as it might be, the question, numero uno, was how to read this techie. Was she an opportunist, who worked wakes and showers and weddings on the off chance of picking up tidbits she could sell to the news outlets or use for blackmail? Or was she really, really smart, educated in one of those rare private schools that made a point of not being consumer-oriented, and therefore enjoyed tripping up for-profit organizations of any kind, on principle? Or was she simply and ingenuously honest, driven by a moral imperative to Do the Right Thing coupled with a naïve conviction that law enforcement officers were the site of first resort whenever trouble reared its ugly, commonplace head?

After the message finished playing out, Jen turned an openly third-degree-interrogation gaze onto the techie's face. "So, Dorothy Benton. Did *you* send that message? Or an associate of yours? A sys-op cop of the Federal persuasion could determine the origins in minutes, if not seconds, you know."

Dot's eyebrows shot halfway up her forehead. "*Me?*" Her voice came out as a squeak. "You think *I* sent that message?" Her eyes narrowed. "But hey. That's what you *would* say, wouldn't you, if you wanted to protect yourself—or Burt. Or Mr. Molson. Who are the prime beneficiaries of Ms. Molson's estate."

Jen neither looked away nor blinked. "What, are you telling me you're an expert on Ms. Molson's last will and testament, honey?"

Dot rolled her eyes to the ceiling. Such juvenile evasion did not by any means let her off Jen's steely visual hook, for Jen saw to it that the hook bit all the deeper when Dot's gaze flicked briefly back to Jen's eyes and came finally to rest somewhere in the vicinity of Jen's right ear. "Just a lucky guess." Dot's manner aimed for the airy. "Considering how both you and Burt are reacting. Namely, *guilty.* Not wanting to let the cops check this out, the way most people would be eager to do, to establish their *innocence.*"

Jen pulled up a copy of the temp-work contract Dot had signed at the be-

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ginning of her shift. "If you want to talk legalities, Dorothy, let's start with your stated intention to violate the explicit letter of the contract you signed not much more than an hour ago. It says here that you promise not to disclose to or discuss with any outside party any information whatsoever that you encounter in the course of your work on this project. But just a few minutes ago you told your work director that you were thinking of taking a piece of information to the Big Listening Ear, a site that specializes in publicizing the information it finds interesting as widely as possible. How do you plead, Dorothy? Guilty, or not guilty?"

A thick dark tide of scarlet crept from Dorothy's throat all the way up into her hairline. "You don't look like it, but you're really quite the bitch, you know?"

Jen suppressed a sigh. Intelligent or not, this one was no different from any other techie of her generation. Foreign-trained workers offered more advantages than simply being adequately educated. Jen ignored the outburst as the diversion it obviously was and continued to give her the eye of authority while she waited for the answer she knew must come next.

Dot folded her arms tightly over her chest; she shifted her weight from one leg and hip to the other. "You people are really cold. I mean, this is supposed to be a wake to memorialize someone you all supposedly admired and loved, and all anyone around here cares about is the profit motive." She chewed on her bottom lip, unfolded her arms and shoved her fists into the pockets of the loose, baggy smock she wore over jeans. "There's something wrong here," she said finally. "I've done e-wakes before, you know. And they've been nothing like this." She swallowed hard. "I only said that stuff about the Big Listening Ear to try to scare Burt into doing what he should. I mean, that dude thought he could shut me up just 'cause he's my boss. Well, what I'm *really* thinking now is that I should go to the cops myself. I never had one thought of actually going to the Big Listening Ear. Telling Burt that was the only way to make him take me seriously."

"I see," Jen said dryly. Truth or dare? "Unfortunately, Dorothy, the local cops aren't much for dealing with cyber stuff. What we really need is a cyber cop with QC access. That'll give us the surest chance of tracking down the perp without any further ado."

"The perp?" Dot said with what looked like the uncertainty of confusion (but *could* be fear of being discovered).

"Yeah, the perp. As in the person who sent that scurrilously libelous message."

Dot frowned. "The *perp,*" she said slowly, "is the *murderer,* not the person who *outs* the murderer."

Jen snorted. "Not if there isn't a murder—as there so clearly and obviously isn't."

The techie looked shaken. Jen gestured her to a chair, too suspicious of the girl to send her back to work. "Make yourself comfortable, Dorothy. It will probably be a while before we can get a sys-op cop on site. They don't exactly grow on trees, you know."

When Dot was safely seated at the conference table with a GameBook ™ to keep her occupied, Jen went to her terminal and pulled down her address book. Federally licensed cybercops might not grow on trees, but she knew one who owed her a favor, big-time. Which was exactly the kind she needed to solve this little tempest in a teapot.

* * *

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"Lennie, this is important. *Please*. I need your entire attention."

Lennard Molson pulled his gaze from the mirror to stare at her with total, confounded incredulity. "And you don't think *this* is important?" He looked back at his reflection in the mirror and slowly, steadily lowered the weight-loaded barbell back to the mat. "I need the input of someone I can trust, Jennie. And now that Laura's gone, well . . ." Lennie swallowed, trying to force back the lump that rose in his throat every time he uttered his departed beloved's name. He took a step toward Jen and gestured helplessly. "She always said that my trainer understood how to build muscles and safeguard my health very well, but that he knew nothing about the *aesthetics* of bodybuilding. Jennie, she *knew*. She knew exactly what my ideal was." Lennie sighed tremulously. Softly, he said, "She was a genius, Jen. You know that? She was just one goddamned fucking genius, that the world has now lost." Suddenly he saw that Laura's death wasn't just *his* loss, but the *world's*, and his eyes misted and glazed over. And then another thought cheered him. He raised his eyebrows at Jen. "I suppose that's what everyone's saying at the wake?"

"Didn't you hear anything I said, Lennie?" Jen wore that reproachful you-naughty-boy look that used to be so cute but lately just annoyed the hell out of him. "We have a situation, Lennie. A potentially messy situation. I'm confident we can clear this thing up reasonably quickly, but it would help if you could give me a copy of Laura's will and permission to post it on the memorial website."

"Post a copy of Laura's will!" Lennie stepped onto the treadmill and started his pace at an easy 4 mph. "The very idea revolts my soul! And Laura would have *hated* it."

"I agree it's a tacky thing to do. But if we don't do it, the crank will likely flood the Internet with misinformation claiming that Burt is Laura's principal heir." Jen stood in front of the treadmill, blocking Lennie's view of the mirror. "Posting the will on the website will help safeguard the solidity of VirtualFashion.com's reputation. But even more urgent is the need to get a copy for the cybercop I've contacted. If we have a copy of the will, it will be obvious the crank is interested only in spreading lies, which will motivate the cybercop to hunt the bastard down—instead of wondering if there's any truth to the insinuation that Laura was . . . well, murdered."

Lennie stared at her. "Murdered! That's *obscene!*"

Jen put her hand to her brow, looking, Lennie thought, as though she were suffering a sudden stab of indigestion. "Yes, Lennie. It is obscene. And the crank claims that Burt is the major beneficiary of Laura's death. Which is why I want to post a copy of the will on the website."

"Burt! That's *ridiculous!* Why would Laura leave *Burt* her fortune?" Surely her fortune had to be his now, didn't it? They were married! Didn't he own half of everything Laura owned to start with? By god, he deserved to own it all! The best ideas she had exploited had been *his*. Take the virtual mirror idea. Even she'd always credited him with that one. It was he who'd pointed out that people would have a compelling interest in constantly upgrading their image-interfacing software if they could see exactly how they looked to their interlocutors when talking on the phone or on the Internet. Laura had actually doubted that it would sell. But *some* people—like Lennie himself—preferred looking at their own virtual image and setting while talking on the phone to looking at the image and setting of the person they were talking to.

"Obviously," Jen said impatiently, "Laura *didn't*. But unless we can dis-

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play *proof* that she didn't, people are going to wonder whether there isn't some truth in that crank's claim that she was murdered."

Impatient himself, Lennie looked down at the pedometer. Frowning, he nudged the lever controlling the treadmill's speed a half-centimeter higher. "I don't have a copy of the will yet, Jen." He glared at her. "The damned lawyer said he couldn't get copies out to the beneficiaries until Monday morning." Smooth bastard. Had claimed he wanted to do everything in his power to facilitate the settling of the estate so that the company, in particular, would not suffer, while implying there was something wrong with Lennie for wanting a copy of the will ASAP. As though he were a leech on Laura's money. As though they hadn't been *partners*. As though his only interest in Laura had been her money.

Jen leaned against the frame of the treadmill and tapped her ring on a bit of metal. Lennie *hated* people touching his equipment. Preoccupied with the fantasy of shoving her back into the wall, he missed Jen's first words. "—talking the other night about taking the company public, Lennie. Or selling it. But how do you think you'll manage to do either of those things if a scandal like this breaks?" She snapped her fingers. "Poof! Without Laura's creative designs, it could all go up like that. Get it into your head, Lennie, this is an *emergency*. You—or I—have got to get that lawyer on the phone now. Not Monday, not even tomorrow morning, but *now*. This thing has got to be nipped in the bud at once. Which means we've got to get the terms of Laura's will up on the website tonight."

Lennie's feet kept moving on autopilot even as a wave of panic swept his body. His breath grew short and ragged; his skin broke into a chilly, clammy sweat. Wondering if he were having a heart attack, he searched for the faintest sign of chest or left-arm pain.

"Lennie, for godsake! Have you heard a word I've said?" The sound of her ring clicking against the frame of the treadmill, a sound communicating cold, remote impatience, seemed to come from a vast distance. She was unfeeling. Like everyone else. God, what was he going to do without Laura? Only *she* had cared, only *she* would have understood his pain.

Clutching his chest, Lennie leaped—against all proper procedure and training—off the treadmill, dizzy and gasping for breath. For a long moment he struggled to drag enough air into his lungs to gasp out words. "The lawyer won't talk to anyone but the executor of the estate." He realized he was hyperventilating and dimly recalled something about putting a paper bag over one's head. "He was super obnoxious, Jen. Said that any questions I had concerning the estate should be directed at the executor and that any *legal* questions I had should be addressed to my personal counsel." Lennie held his breath for as long as he could stand to, then let it out in one long, explosive gasp. *Arrogant, superior son of a bitch. Acting as though I were nothing, as though he weren't, in effect, my employee because he'd been Laura's. Implying that Laura would have divorced me if she'd lived. Which it never would have come to. We would have worked everything out, like we always did. No question. And besides: she never once used the D-word. Never once. Obviously she hadn't intended to make the separation she was talking about* legal *in any way, shape, or form.* Lennie worked at a glob of phlegm in his throat, dug a tissue out of his pocket, and hawked into it.

"Well, then we can call the executor of the estate," Jen said. "Look, Lennie, if you want me to take care of this myself, I will. Just tell me his name and give me his phone number and I'll get him on the phone pronto."

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"The name's Mercia O'Neill," Lennie said shortly.

Jen tilted her head to one side. "Who is she?" Her eyes narrowed. "I thought I *knew* everyone close to Laura."

It was galling, not ever even to have heard of this person, much less been introduced to her by Laura. As though the relationship had been clandestine. Shit, it was *embarrassing*—the way Jen was looking at him, so speculatively. . . . He grabbed a towel and rubbed his neck and face vigorously. "I have no idea who she is. If Laura ever mentioned her to me, I don't remember."

Jen looked thoughtful now. *Infuriatingly* thoughtful. "Whoever it is, it must be someone Laura trusted. I'm sure she'll want to do everything she can to keep the company from crashing."

They went to his study, and Lennie sent a copy of the number from his address book to Jen's. If Jen were right, at least he'd soon have confirmation that Laura had left her fortune to him. And maybe then the fluttering in his belly would go away. If Laura hadn't, though—if she'd changed her will because she was going to divorce him. . . . No. That wasn't possible. Laura hadn't actually *meant* what she'd said. No, everything would be all right, moneywise. Even if everything *else* was for shit.

Jen would have made the call from the Molson house, but something about Lennie's attitude, something intangibly *off,* made her want the privacy and security of her own office in case the call proved in any way difficult. Or *delicate.* The only time Jen had seen Lennie behave even a fraction this strange was at the dinner party he and Laura had hosted which had happened to be the first social occasion the three of them had been together following the first rendezvous of Lennie and Jen's affair. Afterward, Lennie had said he'd been freaked, convinced Laura could see right through him. Jen had always suspected that Laura *had* seen right through Lennie. The only question in her own mind had been whether she had seen right through Jen, too.

Jen had a lot on her mind, but as she drove hell-for-leather for the office, she found herself wondering whether Laura *had* ever guessed, and if she had, why she had never said Word One to Jen about it. The woman had adored staging scenes for the sheer thrill of being swept into a role. Jen had noticed this long ago and, late one evening as the two of them were sharing a bottle of wine in Laura's office after a hard day's work, had asked about it. Laura's eyes had lit up with pleasure—that Jen had made such an observation, that someone knew her *that well* and did not judge her abominable for it. "Darling," she'd said, sweeping her jeweled wrist in an extravagant arc to create, on the spot, an imaginary stage and audience, "there's nothing that can make a lady feel more like a woman than a good, solid scene. It *transports* me into parts of myself that usually don't work in the real world. In a scene, one can *feel* what is otherwise forbidden and inaccessible."

A bizarre attitude, to Jen's way of thinking. Like Laura, she never went out of her way to avoid confrontation, but the roles one got forced into during any scene—since one did, in fact, get pinned to a set of phrases, attitudes, and responses that were as predictable and rigid as cookie-cutters—made her avoid any kind of confrontation that couldn't be carried on at a chilly emotional temperature and with a clear, calculating state of mind.

Jen smiled sadly as the car pulled into the industrial park in which VirtualFashion.com's main office was located. Laura's attitude about scenes might be bizarre, but then so were many other aspects of her personality, once one began to think seriously about them. Her entire "woman" thing, as

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Jen privately called it, would have made any other woman look like a pathetic, self-deluded nostalgia-freak. But Laura had evoked just enough camp in her self-presentation to remind people more of Mae West than Blanche Dubois. How *had* she gotten away with it? It could only have been because her confidence and style were so superb that one simply had to watch her performance with amused and just partially ironic fascination.

And of course Laura was so damned *nice*. She made her niceness part of her "Lady" persona, but she *was* nice—to every person who ever came into face-to-face contact with her, anyway.

While the car parked itself, Jen blotted the tears that had come into her eyes. Why had she *done* it? Why, why, *why?* She hadn't left a note. She hadn't been anything but upbeat just an hour before she'd boarded the plane to New Orleans. To kill oneself in a hotel room, a couple of thousand miles from home. . . . And in such an ugly, unladylike way. . . .

That wasn't Laura, for sure.

Jen took a minute to wash her face, then sat down at her terminal and placed the call. As she stared at the **WORKING** graphic while waiting for O'Neill to answer, she remembered that she needed to check on Burt and his troublemaker. God she needed a cup of coffee. *Something* to get her brain working. Really bad timing to be having one of her stupid days during an emergency that was demanding every one of her wits to be about her.

Finally the connection came through, and Jen found herself staring at a stunningly beautiful woman. *Or image of a woman. Probably a software, interface, custom-designed.* "I'm Jen Jensen, comptroller of VirtualFashion.com. I'm trying to reach Mercia O'Neill." Jen glanced nervously at the virtual mirror placed just slightly to the right of the holotank, then back at the image. From nowhere came the question of who exactly it was Laura had been meeting in New Orleans. Lennie hadn't known; Jen certainly hadn't known. Did anyone?

O'Neill (or her image) smiled warmly. "Ms. Jensen. I'm so glad, finally, to meet you. Laura told me a lot about you, of course, over the years. But I never leave L.A., you know. And so we've never had a proper opportunity for meeting."

Who *was* this woman? "You've known Laura for *years?*" Jen said. "I had no idea. She never mentioned you—that I recall, at least. And I've known her—sorry, I *knew* her—for a good twenty-five years."

"Actually, Ms. Jensen, you've known her for longer than that. I understand the two of you first met something like thirty-one years ago."

Jen frowned. "Um, no, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that's not true. I didn't meet Laura until well after I'd had my son, who's now twenty-seven."

O'Neill leaned forward and clasped her folded hands under her chin. "I long ago promised Laura that if anything were to happen to her I'd be her personal representative, and would find a way to explain to you what she was never able to do herself. Laura Molson was not always Laura Molson. Twenty-seven years ago, Lawrence Childers moved to L.A. and became Laura Lawrence, by way of transsexual surgery and a change of legal name. Laura told me that although she loved you and loved her son, she could not be a husband and father. After the surgery and hormone treatments and a long transition period, she returned to Seattle and started a business—and purposely recruited you to work for her. Laura, you see, wanted to have it all—a relationship with you and her son and her new identity as well. When you failed to recognize her, she decided not to reveal just how well she

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knew you. Over time, she came to believe that an open understanding with you about who she was would necessarily spoil either her relationship with you and Burt or her security in her chosen sexual and gender identity. She often suffered guilt feelings for the deception, but she did not want to risk losing her connection with you and Burt."

O'Neill tapped the brilliantly manicured nail of her index finger against her lips, then sighed. "This is not all I have to tell you, but it is, I think, the most shocking part. Shall I continue? Or do you need a little time to assimilate before I go on?"

Jen stared stupidly at O'Neill's image. "I can't believe this. I mean, I would have *known*. Their *faces* . . . their faces would have had to be the same, wouldn't they?"

"The same, but different. Expression, posture, hairstyle, cosmetics—all these gender-inflected things make more of a difference than you can begin to imagine." She flashed a slight, fleeting smile. "But of course *Laura* understood this. Her sense of social perception was so acute. . . . Which makes her success no wonder to anyone who realized that about her."

Jen said slowly, "Our marriage was always *difficult,* even though we lived together for a couple of years before making it official. We got married solely because we decided to have a child."

O'Neill cleared her throat. She stared down at something off-camera for a few seconds, then raised her eyes and drew a deep breath. "Although Laura had a big church wedding when she and Lennard married, and although Laura changed her name to Molson so that they would share the same name, Laura arranged with the minister who performed the ceremony not to file the marriage certificate with the civil authorities. She said she did this because she knew that she was still legally married to you and did not want to commit bigamy. Getting a divorce would have required breaking the news of her identity to you. On further thought, when she began to plan her estate, she decided that not divorcing from you would be best, since by that time she had decided that she wanted to bequeath to Lennard—besides the share of jointly owned property that was legally his, and full possession of the main Seattle residence—two hundred fifty thousand dollars for every year they lived together, and no more. Which sum now comes to two million."

Jen's mouth dropped open. "You mean . . . you mean . . . Lennard . . . um, Lennard . . ."

"I mean that you and Burt will inherit the bulk of Laura's estate. As is appropriate for her spouse and child."

Jen put her hand to her throat. "I can't believe a court . . . surely Lennie will contest this. Maybe *she* did not make it legal, but they were, after all, common-law husband and wife, and Lennie believed they were married. And besides, is Laura Molson legally the same person as Lawrence Childers?"

"The answer to the last question is, *yes*. As to the larger issue—if Lennard contests the will, if he loses his case in court he will lose the two million. Which, while it is a fraction of Laura's estate, is a good piece of change. Of course, if he *does* contest, the case will be tied up in court for *years,* since the legalities are murky and muddy. And of course there is also the fact, which Laura was counting on, that Lennard will not want the revelations about her past identity and her tricking him out of a legal marriage—as most of the world will see it—made public."

Jen sighed. "I can see that we *aren't* going to want to put her last will and testament on her web-site—which was what I had wanted to ask you about

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doing, since—" Jen went rigid with horror. "Oh no. Oh my *god*. The crank! Claiming murder! The crank will claim that this proves him right!"

And how would that make her look to the cybercop, once *he* showed up?

"I don't understand," O'Neill said. "*Who* is claiming murder?"

Jen reached for a bottle of water and sagged back into her chair. She couldn't take it in, she really couldn't take it in *at all*. But the stakes, she did realize, had just been raised tenfold.

She hoped to God Mercia O'Neill was really on her side. For the moment, at least, she needed all the competent help she could get making sense of such a damned tangled mess of deceptions, legal and otherwise.

Burt Childers had had lots of practice over the years of his working life perfecting his spontaneous exit routine, so much practice that he'd developed a real style—a veritable panache, one might say—for walking out the door feeling better about himself than he had at the moment he'd been hired. Quitting in disgust or in a huff always boosted his self-esteem, even when it meant losing the chance of collecting unemployment compensation, which in most cases he would have enjoyed if only he'd stuck it out long enough to have been fired. Never—or *almost* never—had he wanted so badly to walk as he did eight hours into his job moderating Laura Molson's e-wake. It had become *the* job from hell.

A new message from the crank arrived hourly in Burt's mailbox, identifiable by the progressive change of the screen name of the sender. The first had come from Mr. America, the second from Madam Byzantine; the third had come from Mr. Conspiracy, the fourth from Ms. Denunciation. And so the crank worked through the alphabet, dropping accusations and revelations as he or she went. After the arrival of the third message, the one from Mr. Conspiracy, which contained a video clip of his mother in bed with Lennie Molson in a room that had motel written all over it, Burt trembled with dread when opening each succeeding message.

Burt had no idea what to believe and what to scoff at as lie and bluff and bullshit. The crank knew about the affair—even had the goods in graphic digital zeros and ones. How much else was true? A little? A lot? Or the whole nine yards?

He desperately wanted to be out of there. But if he walked, Ms. Chirpy, whom his mother had finally decided would be the least threat working under Burt's managerial eye, would cheerfully take over. Who knew what she might do—call the cops, or even post the crank messages to the wake. Burt didn't give a flying *fuck* for preserving the propriety of the wake, but he sure as hell did not want to see his mother's name dragged into the mud. No way could he let her down like that.

And yet . . . he felt like a fly trapped in amber. Though the messages kept pouring in and he kept speeding through them to maintain an edgy and frenetic flow to the list, his subjective sense of time moved with excruciating lethargy, as though he were bound in place with fifty-pound lead weights clamped to his ankles and wrists, while virtual time screamed past at the speed of sound, without his being able to touch any element of—much less control—the situation. Four hours into the mess he began to think longingly of a certain casino he used to inhabit, of a certain blackjack table he once called his own. Scrolling through the hype and sentimental twaddle the opportunists and fans constantly generated, he fantasized making a run by ferry, escaping the insanity, seeking relief in a place that had always given

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him a sense of being in control, of being smart, of being on top—no matter that he was likely to lose his shirt in the game.

When he had play, all the shittiness of a slow, cold, and heartless real-time vanished into nothingness. Play thawed the thick, slushy sleet of reality, freeing him from imprisonment in the ice of the small and ordinary. Heat, speed, super-reality: *that* was to be found in a game that married wits and luck, a game that not just any schmuck could win. *He* had won big playing that game, because he had the right stuff, whatever employers and coworkers might think of him. Though he had lost big, too, he almost never remembered that—unless his mother, say, reminded him of it. To bring him down, he knew. Just to bring him down to the level of everybody else stuck in the slow, frozen amber of real-time.

So Burt sat there at the console, sweating his desire to be out of there, feverishly skimming through message after message, telling himself that this one would be the last and then he'd just get himself *gone,* man. *Out* of there. Away to the one place where shit like this meant less than nothing.

And then his mother surged into the office like a wave of frigid salt water, sweeping away his sweat and limp paralysis, bracing him like a sharp, swift slap to the kisser. "Hey, Honeybunch," she said, crisp and upbeat as all get-out, like she hadn't been working since long before his shift had begun. "You doing okay, bucko? The flow's been fast and heavy, which is really marvelous for VirtualF, but it must be tough on you in here." Her second *you* included Ms. Chirpy, but with the cold light of suspicion clear and hard in her eyes.

Dot didn't say boo. She pretended to be so tuned in to her earphones that she wasn't even aware the boss had walked into the room. She'd just had a coffee and rest-room break—during which she might very well have used her personal phone, since Burt didn't consider following her into the john as falling under the purview of keeping an eye on her. They only had two more hours, anyway, before her shift would be ending. It wasn't as though they could physically stop her from raising Cain if she wanted to.

"Ma, this shit is getting so weird, I think I'll fucking freak out if I get another hot one from the crank." Burt kept his voice low, but darted a heavy look Ms. Chirpy's way, to see if he could tell whether she could hear his actual words. "When is that cybercop coming, anyway? The freak is using a different screen name and account every time, did you notice?"

His mother moved up against the back of Burt's chair so that she could speak at a volume barely above a whisper. "Given the intensity of these messages, and the amount of effort involved, I think this person must be totally obsessed with Laura Molson or scheming, somehow, to benefit from her death."

Burt twisted around in his chair so that he could see her face. "How could anyone not in her will hope to do that?" When his mother only shrugged, he said, "Hell, do you think this person *might* be somebody she's named in her will?" He faced forward and stared at his flat-screen. "Nah. I mean, what good is a scandal going to do somebody in line for a piece of the pie?"

Burt's mother pressed her fingers into his shoulders and set to work on the knots that had been accumulating in his muscles over the long, stressful hours of his shift. "What a hell of a day it's been, eh." She continued to keep her voice low. "But it's not over yet. Honey, we have got to talk. Seriously. I think the best thing would be for you to get things set up for the next shift—get enough messages that you know aren't from the crank ready for vetting. Say about an hour before the scheduled change in shift. And then send

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Dorothy home early, lock up here, and meet me in my office. Have a drink, maybe something to eat, but definitely talk. Maybe figure out what the hell to do about the rest of the wake, short of closing it down."

Talk. A cold, aching pit opened in his stomach. Burt *loved* his mother. He would even take a *bullet* for her, if it came to that. But she shouldn't expect him to . . . he was her *son*. A mother shouldn't *ask* that kind of thing of her son. Burt mumbled and grunted and reminded her he still had a lot of work to do, the messages were coming in that fast. One from the Governor of Washington State not ten minutes ago. One from the Prince of Wales forty-five minutes ago. One from the Vice President of the United States two hours ago.

"It's a damned shame," she said in a fierce whisper. "Everything going so well, but for that fucking *crank*. Ruining everything. I hate to think of shutting down, but . . ."

Well, if that was *all* she wanted to talk about. . . .

Burt swallowed. His throat had gotten painfully dry. In spite of his misgivings, he awkwardly reached back and squeezed one of her hands, which were still kneading his shoulders, and said, "I guess maybe we do need to figure out some kind of strategy. Before the next shift gets here." Hell, there was no way he was going to pull two consecutive twelve-hour shifts. His vision was getting kind of blurry as it was.

After his mother had gone, Dot tittered nastily. "Oh wow! The plot is definitely thickening. I mean, I know a real Oedipal situation when I see one. Sometimes temp work is totally the coolest. Maybe no benefits, maybe no job security, but you sure do get to sample some way different slices of life."

Burt cranked up the volume on his headset. The slowness and lethargy settled ever more heavily over him. Only one thought slipped through the anxiety: if he could convince her to shut down the wake, he'd be out of it. She was good—in fact, she was a pro. If there were any fallout from the crank, she could handle it herself. She wouldn't need him for anything then.

Yeah. That was the way to go.

And so to the casino . . .

"I'm sorry, Jen, but I'm going to have to contact the New Orleans police."

First the guy comes in when she's telling Burt that Laura was his father, then he discovers that all the crank messages were sent via hacked ISP accounts, and now *this*. Jen seriously regretted that she had drunk chardonnay during the break she'd taken with Burt. She realized, now, that she should have popped for a shot or two of Glenlivet.

"Christ, Mike, you do that, and this thing will be Page One on every news site tomorrow morning. Which is just what this crappy little crank wants. They're not going to find any virus in Laura's body. But by the time they finish their sensational postmortem, we'll all have been run through the rumor mill and every scrap of our flesh and bones squeezed into cat-food."

Mike made a sympathetic face and patted her hand. "That would be one raw deal, for sure. But I don't have any choice, Jen. If I didn't report it, my license would be on the line. You do know these QC jobs don't exactly grow on trees, don't you?" He snapped the fiber-optic cable out of the jack and folded his terminal and slipped it into the inside pocket of his cadmium yellow silk sports jacket.

"God, Mike, I feel as though I've been fucking sandbagged." The weirdest, spookiest thought crossed her mind. Could *Laura* have set her up like this? For some bizarre, long-term revenge?

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Unthinkable.

Jen caught Mike's eye. "You will keep working on running down the crank, right?"

Mike spread his thick, hirsute fingers in an I'll-do-what-I-can-but-don't-expect-much-from-it gesture. "*All* of the addresses, so far, were hacked. If the hacker's uplinking directly through a satellite relay instead of a cable or phone line, we'll never catch him, QC or no QC. If it does happen to be murder, though, the N.O. cops are going to be mighty interested in identifying the crank. You want my advice, Jen?"

Jen smiled sourly. "Is it free?"

Mike's balding gray head jerked a little sideways for wryness. "Look around you. The crank's likely to be someone Laura knew. Someone *you* know. To me, it looks personal. Not like a cutthroat business op. Know what I'm saying?"

Jen drew a deep, shivery breath. "Yeah. I'm afraid I do."

He held out his large, meaty hand to shake. "You take care now, Jen. And shoot a message my way if you get any new information or lead that could help me nail this joker. All right?"

Jen mustered a smile of thanks, though she felt as though she were shaking hands with her executioner. "I guess it'd be nice to know that after this guy wrecks VirtualFashion.com, he'll have to do prison time for the pleasure of having done so." Cold comfort, that. But talking about the wreck of VirtualFashion.com made her see that it couldn't have been Laura setting them up. Laura would never have wrecked her own monument to success. VirtualFashion.com had been her child, her baby. She liked to say that, to explain her passion for the business. Jen had always believed it, too. She hadn't known Laura might be Burt's father then.

So. Did that make Burt and VirtualFashion.com siblings?

The next afternoon, Jen interviewed and hired, by telephone, a private dick called Raymond Lesser. Mercia O'Neill recommended him. Jen didn't know private dicks from dogs, but she trusted Mercia. That he seemed not to know who Mercia was helped Jen ignore the possibility of conflict of interest. She forwarded all the crank's messages and gave him Mercia's number. Mercia had the details he'd need to make a start excavating Laura's secret life.

All told, it was a terrible day. Jen had slept for only an hour and a half, just after dawn. Sunday morning was usually a time for lingering in bed, working her leisurely way through the news sites and sipping OJ, a soy breakfast beverage, and coffee. But this Sunday morning she woke shaky and queasy, not just from the insomnia, but with the consciousness of all she would have to do that day to head off threats to her and hers. She had lain awake half the night, devising plans and lists and strategies and tormenting herself with the question of why Laura had never trusted her enough to reveal the truth.

She supposed Mike would file a report with the NOPD on Monday, at the very latest. Because Laura had left instructions that she was to be cremated, a postmortem would already have been scheduled, but not, probably, with the aim of looking for difficult-to-spot foul play. The crank's message had named a very specific virus; Jen assumed that once the NOPD got Mike's report, they would send special instructions to the pathologists to look for it. It would be the special instructions, Jen guessed, that would get leaked to the media.

The idea of hiring the dick had been her sole brilliant thought of the in-

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somniac night, a four-twenty A.M. special. Obviously Laura had had an entirely other network of friends of whom her apparently closest friends and associates had been ignorant, living a virtually double life. *Why?* And did the reason she had lived a double life have anything to do with the crank? Surely the two must be connected . . .

Though hiring the private dick made her feel a little less anxious, she found herself powerless to do anything about the other source of her unease. Burt had flaked out on her. She'd had to cancel the rest of the wake, of course, but that didn't bother her—much, anyway. So VirtualFashion.com didn't rake in quite as much as they'd hoped for. Big deal. What mattered was Burt. He hadn't stayed around to finish their talk after Mike had gone and hadn't answered his personal phone or email since then. His nakedly apparent state of mind after she'd broken the news about Laura being his father had been one of betrayal, hurt, and panic. Oh yes, that had been panic in his eyes. No question. And Jen had no notion of how to account for it. She had made a stop at his studio apartment on the way home, but he hadn't answered the door, and all the lights had been out.

Usually, when Burt was upset, he did one—or both—of two things. He talked to her, his best, most understanding bud, or he went looking for action, with the aim of blowing a big pile of dough. He'd been claiming for the last six months that the twelve-step program she'd sprung for had set him straight for life, so presumably he wouldn't take the second recourse now. But she had to wonder, since he certainly wasn't taking the first.

She had to talk to him. She had to find out what outlandish things were going through his head. He needed her. She was his *mother.*

Lennard Molson may not have been literally foaming at the mouth, but it would be fair to characterize him as raving. "Goddam two-timing bitch!" he said once. And twice. And a third, fourth, and fifth time, followed by variants like "Fucking whore, to think I *trusted* her!" Told every time he called Jen's number that if he left a message she would return his call as soon as she was free, told every time he called VirtualFashion.com that Jen Jensen was in a meeting and not taking phone calls, Lennie finally stormed into the garage and fired up his Quantum Generation BMW.

He could barely stand to wait for the garage door to open and, when it did, took the driveway in reverse at 30 mph. A yellow light on the dash strobed in jabbing, urgent violence. The computer's voice blasted out of the stereo speakers. **Road Rage Alert! Road Rage Alert! Safety Override in Progress! Any attempt to drive this vehicle manually will result in engine shutdown!**

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

Lennie slammed his fist against the small plastic knob of a steering wheel while rage reduced him to a veritable tape-loop of vituperation. Even his best beloved car had betrayed him! It was as though the entire universe had turned on him. All he could *do* was fume, and curse, and slam his fist against the (nonresponding) steering wheel until the car had driven him at the crawling legal speed limit to the Western Dot-Com Industries parking lot. "Park in the CEO's spot," Lennie snarled at the computer. Obediently, the car parked itself beside Jen Jensen's flashy red Toyota, which was parked in the spot marked **CFO/VirtualFashion.com.**

"Morning, Mr. Molson," Heidi, the receptionist, called as Lennie tore through the small lobby and made a beeline for Jen Jensen's office.

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"Well, Mr. M! What a pleasant surprise!" Mortimer, Jen's assistant, smiled broadly and tipped Lennie a wink. "Sharp PJs you have there. And heavy dittos for the pecs."

Lennie jerked his head at the door of Jen's office. "Is she in there? Or has she moved into Laura's office already?"

Mortimer pursed his lips. "Jen is seriously tied up in a phone interview, Mr. M. The New Orleans—"

Mortimer sprang to his feet as Lennie charged the CFO's door. Missy, the assistant's ordinarily laid-back spaniel who'd been enjoying a morning snooze in her basket behind Mortimer's desk, awakened by the sudden commotion, made a ferocious rush for Lennie's vulnerably bare ankle, growling and barking with indignant and outraged fury. By a mere fraction of an instant, Lennie managed to yank the door open before the growling little floppy-eared albino spaniel sank her teeth into his flesh. "Yow!" Lennie screeched. "Son of a *bitch!*"

"For God's sake, Lennie, I'm in the middle of a phone interview," Jen said, glancing over her shoulder.

"Get this monster *off* of me! It's trying to *kill* me!"

Jen leaped to her feet. "Mortimer, will you *kindly* control your animal! She's a guest in this office, not some kind of whacko guard dog."

"Missy! Let him go! Come on, girl, let him go. You know you're not supposed to bite people." Missy didn't want to let go, but when Mortimer delivered a smart rap to her muzzle, finally she did, and the assistant lifted her into his arms and held her snugly against his chest. "I don't know what's gotten into her," he said, stroking the nose he'd just slapped. Predictably his long blond forelock flopped down into his eyes, which regarded Lennie with such sensitively soulful apology that Lennie had to fight the urge to punch the boy's goddam lights out. "She's only once ever bitten anybody else, and that was a sales person trying to shake me down for what he falsely claimed was a benefit rock concert for firefighters."

"You'll pay for the ER visit, that's for fucking sure." Lennie ignored the dog's renewed growling and shouldered his way into the room. "As for *you,* you treacherous bitch. Who I trusted, who I helped, who I cared for, who I—"

"Lennard, please," Jen said sharply. "I'm talking to Lieutenant Dugas of the New Orleans Police Department. He's in charge of investigating Laura's death."

Lennie stared. "*What?* He's investigating Laura's *death?* What's there to investigate?" His eyes narrowed. "Are you sure he's a cop?" He stared at the image in Jen's holotank and frowned. The guy did look distinctly cop-like. "Unless he's trying to figure out why she did it. . . . Do cops do that?"

"That's Mr. Molson, the deceased woman's partner?" the figure in the holotank asked.

Lennie threw back his shoulders and made to shoot his cuffs but realized, for the first time, that he had left the house in his pajamas. A dull red flush stained his face. He glanced down at himself and quickly buttoned his pajama top. Swallowing, putting his shoulders back, he looked with haughty dignity into the monitor's lens. "Yeah. I'm Lennard Molson. Maybe you'd care to explain why you're investigating my wife's suicide?"

"I can't hear you too well, Mr. Molson," the cop said. "Or see you that good, for that matter. If you'd come closer—I'd like to make an appointment for later today to interview you, too. And then maybe you'd let me finish interviewing Ms. Jensen."

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Lennie sank into Jen's chair. Jen pressed a tissue against the blood welling up from the wound on his ankle, but Lennie, irritated, waved her away. "Now look, Lieutenant." Lennie couldn't remember the guy's name since he hadn't been paying attention when Jen had said it. "I think I've got a right to know what you're investigating. I mean, we all know it was suicide. She fired the gun herself, you people said Thursday night that the evidence was conclusive." Those were the words that had been used: *the evidence is conclusive*. For some reason the very words had stuck in Lennie's mind; they had rung some kind of bell, providing a kind of closure he knew damned well he didn't want to undo now.

"Before I answer your question, I'd like you to answer one of mine, Mr. Molson." The Lieutenant leaned forward and jabbed his index finger directly at Lennie; his brilliantly green eyes glittered. "Just now, when you came into the room, you called Ms. Jensen a quote *treacherous bitch,* unquote. Would you mind explaining why?"

Mind? Lennie would be delighted to explain. But Jen, who had been hovering behind his chair all along, now chose to make her move. "Lieutenant," she said, reaching over Lennie's shoulder to swivel the camera's pedestal so that it excluded Lennie from the lens's range. "I have a very tight schedule that this interview is, as I mentioned earlier, disrupting." Jen moved to the side of Lennie's chair, into range of the camera, as she spoke. "If you have questions for Mr. Molson, I would appreciate your asking them somewhere other than in my office, on my time."

Lennie surged to his feet and shoved Jen out of camera range. "I would be happy to talk to you, Lieutenant," Lennie said loudly, trying unsuccessfully to stare at the camera and look at his interlocutor's image in the holotank at the same time. "Any time, any place."

"Very good, Mr. Molson. I'll be in touch, and we can continue our conversation later."

Lennie shot Jen a smug look promising full disclosure of all her scheming, lying, and cheating. There was *nothing* he wouldn't gladly tell that cop—or anybody else, for that matter. Beginning with her sleeping with him while having been married to his wife all along—

Making him both a fool and a bigamist. Not to mention a sap.

Lennie stalked angrily to the door. Talking to the cop, he realized, would be a hell of a lot more satisfying than merely tearing a strip off Jen, who probably didn't give a damn, anyway, about what he thought of her.

Jen called after him. "Wait, Lennie, don't rush off. We really need to talk."

Lennie halted in his tracks and rounded on her. "Talk? *Us?* About what? About all your lies to me? About all your scheming? About all your treachery?"

Jen put her hand on his arm, but Lennie jerked it away. "I know you must be terribly hurt by Laura's leading a secret life." The soothing tone in Jen's voice sent his blood pressure into the stratosphere. "I know *I* am. And Burt—he's just devastated, Lennie. He took off Saturday night and I haven't been able to find him since. I think this whole thing about Laura being his father has him totally freaked out."

"Save it for that cop," Lennie said harshly. "*I* sure don't want to hear it. Because you *lie,* Jen. And if there's one thing I have no use for, it's liars."

"Lie? The only lie was Laura's." Jen's eyes glittered. "And, of course, *our* lie to *Laura.*"

Lennie's fists clenched; he felt like slugging her. But of course he didn't. He'd never hit a woman in his life, and there was no way he'd let this one

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provoke him into breaking such an admirable record. What he did do was leave without answering her, which was, he thought, statement enough. *Let her put* that *in her pipe and smoke it!*

"Really love those PJs, Mr. M.," Mortimer said as he stormed through the outer office and into the corridor.

Lennie comforted himself with the thought that if the snide little bastard stuck by his boss long enough, he'd soon see what it was like, getting shafted. Then he'd need all the comfort his yapping white bitch could deliver—and had better hope she wouldn't bite *his* ankle, too.

Burt hunched over the vile, burned latte that was still too hot to drink and gloomily tried to shut out the dreary orange reality of his Mickey D's surround. There was no point in driving on to the next casino. He'd been to almost every casino in the state already. Not one of them would agree to let him play on credit. They claimed there was a law prohibiting them from extending credit to someone who'd defaulted on gambling debts in the past. It didn't matter that he would be coming into a bundle because he was Laura Molson's son and heir. The terms for him—now and forever, unless the legislature were someday to revise the statute—were cash, and cash only, for play.

Sitting in the uncomfortable yellow plastic structure that couldn't be rocked back on its legs because every bit of furniture in the place was meanly bolted into the floor, at the end of his quest for release, his mind suddenly blank of purpose, Burt's brittlely contingent psychological defenses could no longer hold back the flood of emotion that had been threatening to overwhelm him since his mother had dropped her bombshell on him some forty hours earlier. The sense of betrayal, of having been lied to and played with and deprived of even a shred of respect from those who most owed it to him ravished his chest like a bullet that had heated into burning, molten lead. They had had no *right* to conceal the truth from him, a truth that he thought must be the most important truth that had ever touched his life. He went over and over and over it, the fact of the deception, how it indicated they had thought nothing of him, had cared nothing about what *he* might need, about what *he* might think. Sitting there, forcing down the scorched, bitter latte, he grew so angry he wanted to smash something, to kill somebody, to make them see that he wasn't nothing, that he wasn't simply what was left as a remainder of more important issues, more important concerns, more important moves.

He hated them all. His mother. His "father." And all the others who must have known. His mother *claimed* not to have known. But that was bullshit. You couldn't be married to someone and have a child with them and not recognize them just because they'd had their balls cut off and grown some tits. And then that whole get-up of Laura Molson's *style*. All that super-feminine stuff. Just this side of camp. It was probably an open joke in certain circles. Probably, even, a reason for Laura Molson's celebrity. Only he hadn't been in on the secret.

The body of the latte had been bad enough, but the dregs in the bottom of the cup that Burt drank unintentionally were revolting, like drinking cigarette ashes, leaving a disgusting residue on his teeth. Burt heaved himself to his feet and crushed the cup in his hand as he roared up to the counter. Ignoring the customers waiting for service, Burt flung the cup at the menu display and growled at the ancient crone working behind the counter. "You

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call this *coffee? I* call it *slop!*" Dramatically, Burt hawked a great gob of saliva and spat it onto the floor.

"Hey, asshole!" The teenager who was at the head of the line—whose shoe Burt missed by maybe an inch and a half—reared back in fury. "You owe me a serious apology, man!"

"He called it slop, but he drank it," the old crone said loudly. "Every drop, he drank," she said, holding up the crushed cup and shaking it, to show just how empty it was.

They were turning on him like the mob turning on Frankenstein. People were so *stupid*. The old crone, having a nothing job and acting like her corporate employer's honor was identical with her own. The kid, taking umbrage when the spit hadn't even touched his ratty old running shoe. Everyone else, tittering. Disgusted and disheartened, Burt stomped out to his car and programmed it to return to Seattle via the Edmonds ferry.

He was so tired, having had only a handful of naps over the last couple of days, that he fully expected to sleep the entire trip home. But his thoughts buzzed with such anger and recriminations that he could not drop into even the lightest doze. Instead, his mind went over and over and over the messages from the crank, the messages he had wanted to believe were lies from start to finish. But Burt knew that they weren't *all* lies. Some of what the crank said had been spot-on. How, then, could anyone know if *anything* the crank said had been false?

Repeatedly he would come to this question, and then his thoughts would glance off it, as though it were a wall of rubber they had crashed into at high velocity, and either bounce back into anger, or off into a second, more disturbing direction. *To have* that *as my father. In my* genes, *for godsake. A man who couldn't stand to be a man, a man who turned himself into a woman only weeks after his son was born.* That's *what's inside of* me.

And then Burt would writhe with shame and fear, unable to think about whether such suspicions made any sense, unable to think one positive thought about having had Laura Molson for a father, until finally he flung himself back into his rage at the two of them for having lied to and deceived him all the years of his life.

Talking to the Humphrey Bogart image drove her batty. Like talking to an interactive cartoon, Jen thought. Burt's image, though a cartoon figure, was simply a goofy costume and mask that did nothing to interfere with her sense of exactly who it was she was talking to. But Ray Lesser's smoothly Hollywood dick gave the interlocutor no handle for knowing what was image and what was real. On purpose, Lesser had said when she'd interviewed him for the job. He wanted to put clients on their guard, to understand the trickiness of the "private dick business" (as he called it), the partialness and even illusoriness of the kind of information private dicks specialized in acquiring. "People expect miracles of us, expect a total picture, which is never what we can give 'em," he'd warned.

Who could trust someone who talked through a Hollywood image of a dick? Obviously he didn't *want* his clients' trust. No doctor would use a Robert Young image, no attorney would use a Raymond Burr image. VirtualFashion.com had gotten *that* much out of its consultations with image-psyche specialists.

The dick started his report with the "NOPD dope," as he called it, flipping through a small spiral-bound notebook. "First, they're now saying that they

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had their quote reservations all along, because the gun Ms. Molson used to kill herself was reported stolen six months ago in a burglary, from a residence in Metairie. They say she would have had no trouble buying a piece through legal channels, and N.O. has no waiting period. Buying through an unlicensed dealer is more expensive—and takes a little more trouble for an out-of-towner than just walking into a shop off the street. That's mystery number one.

"Mystery number two: she was expecting a call that never came—through the hotel desk. Now she *had* her personal phone with her. And yet she made a point of very anxiously advising the desk that she was expecting the call and that it was important. From somebody named Chris Gaulton.

"Mystery number three: a package about the size of a shoebox was hand-delivered to her by a bellman just two hours before she pulled the trigger. The bellman got the package from a desk clerk, who said that it had been delivered by Federal Express. The cops are working on Federal Express for pertinent details.

"And finally, mystery number four: when she landed in NO, she took the hotel's courtesy limo to her hotel, checked in, and never once, over a period of thirty-six hours, left her room. Had room service for meals. Wouldn't let the maid come in and clean. As far as anyone knows, she just holed up there, waiting for a call to come through the hotel switchboard."

The Hollywood dick image peered narrowly at his notepad and flipped a couple of pages. "As for the TS background." He glanced up from his notepad to give Jen a shrug and a single raised eyebrow, then shoved his hat back, revealing a broad, tough forehead. "The big Q here is why Lawrence Childers left Seattle to become Laura Lawrence. Seattle has always had a bigger support system for people in all stages of TS than L.A. Perhaps he felt he needed to make the change in a completely fresh location. Perhaps he was worried about being spotted in transition by someone he knew. Perhaps he was afraid he'd feel pulled back to you and your son before he'd fully established his new identity. At any rate, as far as we've yet been able to determine, once Laura Lawrence moved back to Seattle, she broke all contact with the people she'd known in L.A., with the single exception of Mercia O'Neill. Ms. O'Neill says they bonded pretty seriously and from the time Laura Lawrence returned to Seattle never went more than two weeks without some kind of contact."

The dick tossed his notepad off-screen. "They served as one another's support system. If they had any problems with their new identities, they didn't go outside their friendship to deal with them." The dick sighed. "I've asked O'Neill to give me access to whatever email correspondence with Laura she saved over the years. She's agreed to do that, but thinks that she'd have a better shot at spotting something helpful than we pros do." The dick grinned. "It's unlikely, but what the hey. So that's where we are, Ms. Jensen. Ready to sift through old emails and waiting on further developments with the NOPD. Presuming you want to keep this investigation running."

If things had been just a tad less desperate, Jen would probably have fired him. But the media wolves were snarling at her doors, the cops had court orders giving them access to all hers, Lennie's, and Burt's financial records and search warrants for their homes (not to mention the premises of Virtual Fashion.com). The discovery in Laura's body of the very virus the crank had named had changed everything. The crank, Jen was convinced, was the murderer; the crank held all the cards and dealt them out at will. Since the

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cops weren't looking for the crank, she had no choice but to keep Ray Lesser in clover. His investigation was their best—and only—hope for survival.

"Look for this Chris Gaulton, whoever he or she might be," Jen said, wishing she had access to Laura's calendar and private email files, all of which the police had removed.

Humphrey Bogart's eyes narrowed. "Oh, yeah. I was about to suggest that myself."

Right, Jen thought as she broke the connection. And you really are Sam Spade, too.

He couldn't help himself. It was like gnawing at a torn cuticle or hangnail, tearing and tearing and tearing at it, drawing blood, tearing at it some more, until finally he'd gotten the whole damned nail swimming in blood. He usually didn't even *watch* the news, except to catch tornadoes and fixate obsessively on the aftermath of mass shootings and earthquakes. Hell, he didn't even watch the annual military sorties the government and CNN jointly staged around the globe. He *knew* it was all bullshit.

He knew it was all bullshit, and yet he sat squirming and writhing in the presence of experts discoursing on Lawrence Childers /Lawrence Molson, on Jen Jensen, and on himself. About himself, they seemed to have the *most* to say, endlessly screening clips of him screaming at the cameras lying in wait outside his apartment, the same clips over and over again so that finally Burt took to mouthing the anguished words right along with his holotank double like some weird news version of lip-synch.

He knew, intellectually, what the formula setup was. One expert spent every breath denouncing Jen Jensen as a murderer. Another declared her innocent and Lennard Molson the murderer. A third said there was a conspiracy of the two of them. While a fourth said the murderer had framed them. The one thing they all agreed upon, though, was that whoever killed Laura Molson, Burt Childers had not been involved. Why? Because they all thought him a loser incapable of having faked the raving hysteria he'd succumbed to when the cops and cameras had moved in on him—and because Ms. Chirpy was a favored guest on every talk show on the Internet, talking about him and his mother being a "classic Oedipal couple" and himself totally "clueless."

He kept thinking it should make him feel less scared to hear himself exonerated in the media's court, but it didn't. He dimly realized that his deepest fear wasn't being arrested and convicted of Murder One, or even his mother's being arrested and convicted. The fear—which he never put into words—that absolutely terrorized him was the suspicion that maybe she *had* done it. He couldn't bear to accuse her—in words—even in his thoughts, but the suspicion lurked, haunting his dreams, making him throw up every time he choked food past the lump in his throat, keeping him glued to the holotank, hoping and waiting to be convinced by the expert who spoke for Jen Jensen's innocence.

He clung to that expert's constant harping on the Fed-Ex tape, which showed the person who had sent the package to New Orleans wearing a hat with such a broad brim that it covered her brow, cheeks, and eyes, and a stylish respiratory mask that covered her nose and mouth. "Why use her real name but at the same time wear a disguise?" the expert repeatedly asked. "Wearing a disguise indicates an intention to conceal one's identity, which simply doesn't mesh with using one's own name."

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Burt wanted to believe it. But he knew that the expert who pointed out that his mother was smart enough to be able to assume people would reason in just that way was right about that. He didn't know anyone smarter than his mother.

Mercia O'Neill called Jen every day—to "touch base," as she put it—usually to discuss the investigation and the media debacle and how both Lennard and Burt persisted in refusing Jen's calls. These conversations were brief, but Jen grew to depend on them and to imagine, in the night, talking to Merica about all the many things churning about in her mind, keeping her from sleep. Mercia began every call asking Jen how she was doing, and Jen would invariably say "Oh, I'm hanging in there." On the day that Mercia called to tell Jen that she thought she'd found a lead in her old correspondence with Laura, though, rather than brush off the opening question as the merest convention, Jen burst out with, "At around one o'clock this morning, I realized that though it may be inconvenient for me now, over all it's much better that Laura was murdered than that she killed herself. That damned crank may ruin me, but he's spared me what would probably have been a worse hell."

Mercia's image looked steadily at her. "It's probably not a good idea for your numbness to be wearing off just yet, Jen. If you know what I mean."

Jen swallowed back tears. "Oh yes," she said. "I know exactly what you mean." She managed a shaky laugh. "So how's your reading going? I guess *that* must be tough for *you*—reading old correspondence is always difficult, since nothing is ever as one's remembered it."

Mercia made a wry face. "You know that Laura and I met in a clinic support group a few weeks before we were scheduled for genital reconstruction. Well, we started up a purely written email correspondence, without face exposure, the way relative strangers do pretty easily. To compare notes, essentially. So that by the time we got to the surgical procedure proper, we were comparing every single detail of our respective experiences. Even down to what our nurses did and said, even their body language, not to mention every draw of blood from our arms. To make all that medical crap less intimidating, I guess. The whole thing was pretty scary, after all. Neither of us had friends or family members present telling us we were doing the right thing. We were both operating on purely gut instinct. And surgery like that . . . well. I'm sure you can imagine."

Jen said, "I hadn't really thought about what it must have been like. But I understand what you're saying."

"As it happens, all of the counseling and medical procedures we underwent were identical—with a single exception." Mercia steepled her perfectly manicured fingers below her chin. "Two days before her surgery was scheduled, Laura had a pre-op examination with the anesthesiologist. Immediately afterward, a technician came into the examining room with an insulated container. Laura identifies this person as 'Claire somebody,' who described herself as a social worker whose job was, among other things, interfacing the interests of sperm banks with the TS program. Pleading that Laura had extraordinarily healthy genes, including all important factors for longevity, in addition to her fantastically good looks and personal charm, Claire persuaded Laura to make a donation. Later, Laura discovered that there was no such position in the clinic—that they never approached patients on behalf of sperm banks."

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Jen bit her lip. "That's all very interesting, but I don't see what it has to do with her murder."

"I'm such a packrat that I still have all the literature the clinic ever gave me, Jen. So after reading that email, I looked at the clinic's staff list, which gives the names and positions and professional bios of all the docs, lab techs, counselors, and nurses working there at the time. And what do I find but the name Claire Grayson, described as a biochemist and the head of the clinic's research division. Which I didn't, at the time, realize that the clinic even had. Claire Grayson, Jen. A name with the same initials as Chris Gaulton."

"So you think, what—this Claire Grayson was using Laura's sperm for *research?*"

Mercia's eyes narrowed. "What would you say if I told you that Claire Grayson moved up to Seattle shortly after Laura returned there with her new identity?"

The hair on the back of Jen's neck prickled. "I'd say that would have been a very strange coincidence indeed."

"Get hold of your cybercop, Jen." A hard, grim look came into Mercia's face, a look that sat oddly on its delicately elegant perfection. "See if he can match up Claire Grayson with the crank. And you should give Claire Grayson's particulars to Ray Lesser, too. Don't try to see her yourself. If this woman is the murderer, she'll be a threat to your personal safety."

What could Grayson's wanting Laura's—or rather Larry's—sperm possibly have to do with Laura's murder? Jen agreed to follow Mercia's suggestions, but thought that Claire Grayson was the most unlikely of long shots.

Added to Burt's many psychological afflictions now was cabin fever. He'd been holed up so many days with the world's foremost talking heads, refusing to answer his phone or attend to his messages, that it was as though their voices had become the only ones in existence. The few real-life voices he heard were those of the people delivering groceries and whoever else had the gall to ring his doorbell. He would prefer not to give the latter even the second or two over the intercom it took to dispose of them, but he dared not cut himself off entirely in case the police happened to be one of those doing the ringing. They would, he was certain, have no compunction in battering down his door—an action the staked-out cameras would take special delight in.

Like most people, Burt scorned the characters in thrillers and horror stories who, acting like idiots, blindly walked into obvious danger. And yet when the Fed-Ex driver rang his doorbell and handed him a package, every ounce of common sense he possessed went south. Thoughts of Laura's Fed-Ex delivery in New Orleans bouncing vigorously about in his mind, he opened the package to find a dedicated phone, a handgun, and a note telling him that if he followed instructions, he could put an end to the media circus and learn who Laura's murderer was.

Giving no serious thought to danger and no thought whatsoever to calling the police and getting backup, he pocketed the gun and the phone and prepared to run the media gauntlet to his car. He would be given the route by phone only after he had thrown off all pursuit. **Do not call the police** was one of the instructions, not particularly reassuring, especially taken with the warning **I'll be monitoring your personal phone. Bring the gun for protection,** however, made him think that although there might be danger, the person who had sent him the package could not be the mur-

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derer, only someone who knew who the murderer was and wanted her or him to be caught.

In other words, he felt righteous, and angry, and confident in his ability to handle the situation—using the gun, if necessary. He thought he couldn't live with the burden of uncertainty even another hour. He had to know. If his mother weren't the murderer, the greatest burden a man had ever had to bear would be lifted from his heart. And if she were . . . no. He didn't *really* believe it; he just feared it. But he was tired of being suspended in limbo. And he was, after all, a grown man, for all his mother persisted in treating him like a kid. Action, whatever the cost, could only be welcome.

Jen didn't understand it, but she wasn't about to refuse Burt's request. The damned Donald Duck interface kept her from getting any sense whatsoever of his state of mind. His terse "Meet me at the wine bar on the cinema level of the Broadway Market" gave nothing away; she knew the place simply because she had seen it on her way in and out of the theater. His "Be sure you don't have any media assholes on your tail" was unnecessary, but absolutely typical of Burt. He probably thought her survival before his appearance in her life a miracle.

To throw her tails, Jen took the bus and made three transfers before alighting on Broadway. Once inside the mini-mall, Jen made a brief foray into a clothing shop simply to see if anyone was following her. She fretted at the thought of Burt, upstairs, lingering in an environment he no doubt hated. Hurriedly she strode through the mall, making for the open stairway positioned in its exact center. She had been trying not to think about how strange it was that Burt wanted to meet in a public place—and the kind of place he would usually not be seen dead in—but now the incongruity filled her with anxiety.

Passing quickly through the newsstand cafe huddled at the foot of the stairway, Jen stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of someone who she knew logically simply could not exist. "Larry," she said silently, to herself. "How *can* it be Larry?" This was Larry as he had been in his early twenties, when Jen had first met him. An empty cup sat before him; across the tiny table sat a tall glass of cafe latte, barely touched. But as Jen's gaze drank him in, she saw that his mouth was in some way different. And his eyes. And the way he held the e-book in his fist, not at all like the way Larry would have held it.

Someone jostled her in passing, and Jen came abruptly to herself. Would Burt be there? Or would he have gone, impatient with being kept waiting?

Jen took the steps at a near run. She hoped Burt's anger had ebbed, but she knew that was unlikely. If it had, he would have talked to her face-to-face rather than left her a message using his Donald Duck interface. She understood his anger. He felt betrayed, but the person who had betrayed him was no longer available to receive his anger. And he needed to be angry with someone.

Though Jen reached the cinema level short of breath, her heart lifted when she caught sight of Burt seated in the wine bar. At that time of morning, with only one other person sitting in the dingy murk, the place was deserted, running on Automat service until, probably, the lunch hour. Burt looked terrible, as though he hadn't bathed, shaved, or changed his clothes in a week, as though he hadn't slept or eaten. When he saw her, he jumped to his feet so abruptly that his chair crashed backward. Hoarsely he cried

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out an inarticulate sentence. His face contorted horribly, then crumpled into a terrible sorrow.

"Burt? What is it? Honey, what's wrong? I got here as soon as I could, but to make sure I lost all the media people, I ended up taking four different buses."

"You're not supposed to be here!"

Jen stepped closer, intending to fold him into a hug, but Burt took two steps backward and held his hand up to stop her coming closer. "You asked me to come, Burt. How else would I know to find you here? I came as soon as I could after getting your message."

A voice Jen did not recognize spoke from behind her, and a hand gripped her right arm at the elbow, its thumb resting lightly on the tender spot so vulnerable to pain. "From the beginning it was her fault, Burt. Your father would never have given up his manhood if she hadn't made him feel so inadequate as a man. Why do you think he fled from her in the first place? If it had been for any other reason, he would have let you know. Obviously he didn't want to tell you the truth, since that would have destroyed your faith in your mother. And if Larry was one thing, it was decent."

"Who *are* you?" Jen yanked at her arm, to remove it from the woman's grip, but the fingers were like iron clamps and pulled her back, off balance, jamming Jen close against the woman's body. Jen turned her head sideways and caught a glimpse of the woman's face. A thought leaped in her mind. "You must be Claire Grayson! The woman who defrauded Larry of some sperm. There are a few people out looking for you, Claire Grayson."

"You see? Your mother knows who I am. Obviously Larry mentioned me to her. Which is how she found out about Larry's clone and knew that if she wanted to hold onto his money she'd have to kill Larry before he changed his will to leave everything to Anthony, as he intended."

"What do you mean, Larry's—" Jen yelped with pain as Grayson's thumb jammed brutally into the pain spot.

"Take out your gun, Burt," Grayson said. "You owe it to your father to avenge his murder. First she drives him not only to leave you, but to change his sex. And then she forces him to kill himself. She's a menace, Burt. Because the kind of woman who'd do that—"

Though nauseated from the pain and struggling to free her arm, Jen kept her eyes on Burt's scared, confused face.

"Is it true, what she says, Ma? *Did* you kill my father?"

Not *Laura,* but *my father.* "Burt, I did not kill your father, or Laura, or anybody else. This woman tricked Larry out of his sperm, just before he had the sex-change operation. Laura never knew anything about a clone. What Laura's executor thinks is that this woman was blackmailing Laura to keep her from telling you and me that Laura was your father. *This* is the murderer. So get out your phone and call 911, Burt!"

Burt reached into his pocket and brought out a pair of phone glasses.

"You use that phone, Burt, and *I'll* shoot *you,*" Grayson said. Very close to her ear Jen heard the whir made by the override of the gun's safety mechanism. "Either you kill her or I kill you and leave her to take the blame. It's a simple decision. Either you survive, or neither of you does, since taking the rap for your murder will get her a lethal injection for sure."

"Shoot my own mother?" Burt said incredulously. "You got the wrong man, lady. If I got to, I'll take that bullet for her, any day."

Jen rocked the left side of her body violently backward and, knocking

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Grayson off balance, flung their bodies onto the floor with herself on top. The gun went off before they hit the floor, deafening Jen, so that she heard nothing as she struggled to roll over onto Grayson and pin her. Gasping and sweating and grunting, they grappled and struggled and flailed against one another. Jen's body surged with a physical power she hadn't known she possessed, making her more fierce than desperate. But her fierceness counted for nothing when Grayson smashed the butt of the gun into her temple. Jen knew only a moment of blinding, nauseating pain. One final surge of energy powered a last, fleeting moment of struggle, until suddenly and inexorably she dropped into unconsciousness.

His mother looked so pale and shaky that Burt could not stop trying to reassure her. "You're going to be fine, Ma. You've got a concussion, but it's not bad. Really. They did a CT-scan, you know. All the docs say there's nothing to worry about." He couldn't remember her ever being so still before. Her face was so quiet it was like a mask.

She opened her eyes and caught him staring. "I may have a headache but I haven't lost my memory, honey." Her voice was weak, her tone flat. Burt wondered if the docs had told him everything. "You've already said that about five times in the last half hour. Do you think you could give it a rest?"

Burt shifted on the molded plastic bedside chair and blew out his breath in a long, anxious puff. "It's a mob scene downstairs in the lobby," he said. "The cops don't think that woman's son knew a thing about her plot." Anthony was his name. Burt had seen images on the Internet already of the guy being mobbed by cameras. They kept putting up pictures of Laura and this Anthony side by side and then overlaying them to show how identical they were.

That creeped Burt out more than the way this woman had developed an obsession about Laura being the "father" of the kid she'd made using his sperm to make a clone carried in one of her stripped ova. That part—the woman's taking Larry's sperm, making a child, and stalking the child's father was easy to understand. The stalking part was almost like the way Laura had reintroduced herself into Burt and his mother's lives after changing her identity. There was nothing particularly unusual about *that* kind of thing. But what *Larry* had done—making himself into *Laura*—Burt would *never* understand *that*. What had made him do it? Would Anthony, being his clone, want to do it, too? Or had it been some environmental thing, nothing to do with his genes? Burt got up and turned his back on the bed to look down at the parking lot below. It was full of news vans sprouting satellite dishes.

"It was a miracle she didn't kill you."

Burt turned back to the bed and found his mother's face blazing with furious intelligence.

She lifted a hand, strangely nude stripped of its rings, and lightly touched the clear plastic cannula clinging to her nostrils. "I knew she had taken the sperm, but I couldn't put two and two together to figure out *why*. I should have realized. If I had, I would have known you would be her next target. You were the real obstacle between her son and Laura's fortune."

"I guess she got tired of getting a check from Laura every month," Burt said sarcastically. "Sixteen thou a year isn't exactly chickenfeed."

"Mercia thinks Laura probably told her the party was over, that it didn't matter anymore whether she told the world. After all, Laura was leaving Lennie. And she had probably decided that you were old enough to handle

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hearing the truth. And it's not like that's the kind of scandal that would have hurt the business."

"Always the bottom line, Ma. Just like I'm always telling you."

His mother's eyes filled with tears. "She could have killed you. I thought for sure she'd get at least one of us."

"She's a lunatic," Burt said shortly. "She actually thought I'd kill you for her." He leaned forward and grabbed hold of the hand that wasn't connected to the pulse oximeter.

She bit her lip and hesitated. Finally, she said, "You didn't really think I'd killed Laura, did you?"

Burt guffawed loudly, even as he blushed a fiery red. "What, *me?* Nah. I thought it was Lennie all the time."

Jen Jensen closed her eyes. "Me, I had my money on Dorothy. Which reminds me. When I get out of this place, I think maybe I'll look her up and offer her a job."

"Guess I'd better call the doc, Ma, and get you another CT-scan. Something's definitely wrong in your thinking."

She didn't open her eyes, but her mouth curved into a smile. "Go take a walk, Burt. You're not helping my headache, and I feel like taking a snooze."

Everything was back to normal, Burt thought, gingerly pecking her cheek and bounding away from the dreary monitors and lines. He'd saved her life—even offered to take a bullet for her—and all she could do was complain that he was bothering her. That was his mother, all right.

Once the initial wave of interest in Claire Grayson and the clone she had made reached satiation, media clamor for "full disclosure" of the terms of Laura Molson's will swelled into a feedback loop of pundit- and poll-driven frenzy. Since site managers wanted nothing but Laura Molson fodder, pundits and site feeders launched into full-blown obsession mode. Jen Jensen knew she should be happy about this, since sales figures at VirtualFashions.com were busting through the ceiling, but she found that being at the eye of the media storm was not only an anxious and tedious place to be, but made it unlikely that she would manage to leave the hospital without facing a mob.

Mercia O'Neill, however, saved the day. She had Laura's lawyer arrange a press conference in Harborview Medical Center's auditorium for the time of Jen's discharge. Mercia reasoned that most media persons on the premises would be drawn to attend the press conference—leaving, at most, only a handful of cameras to cover the hospital's several exits.

Dressed in bulky clothing and a blowzy gray wig and moving slowly with the assistance of a walker, Jen left through the front door and stepped onto the first bus that pulled up. Two stops later, Jen got off the bus and into the car that Mortimer had been driving behind it.

At home, unable to face the hundreds of messages that had piled up on her personal voice mail account, Jen did a load of laundry, washed her hair, changed into sweats, and started cleaning the refrigerator. She was home, it was all over, there was only the aftermath to cope with and then it would be life, again, as usual.

Right. Only now Burt will have millions to gamble away, and I . . .

For days she had been feeling . . . lacking, somehow, that Laura had not trusted her. As though there had been something wrong with herself. From the beginning of their relationship, it had been she who had sought to please

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Laura. She had been immensely flattered when the "headhunter" Laura had hired had put her on the short list for a job she had not even been looking for, flattered to have been "stolen" from a dot-com accounting firm. She had been flattered, but she knew now that it had been only a ruse for Larry's—Laura's—inserting herself back into Jen's life. Laura had played her for a fool.

And now the question that had been choking her, the question that had been stifling and smothering her since that nightmare of a Saturday night when Mercia O'Neill had told her about Laura's double life, burst out in a sudden access of rage. *How could Laura have done this to her?* How could she have lied for so many years? She had known—nobody had known better—what Jen had felt and thought about Larry's flight. With a single sentence Laura could have—

Jen emptied the contents of the vegetable drawer into the compost pail. It was not just Laura, it was Larry. Mercia had told her, and everyone now *knew*: Laura and Larry were one and the same. Repeatedly Jen had butted up against that fact and *still* she could not seem to take it in.

Larry, Larry. She thought of the young man—Larry's clone—seated at a cafe table in the Broadway Market. Jen closed the refrigerator door, rinsed her hands of the rotting vegetable goop, and nearly ran back to her bedroom. She knew exactly where to find the letter; after Burt's birth she had filed it away with her most important documents, thinking that one day she would give it to Burt to read, to answer any questions he might have about his father. She never had given it to him, though, because there had never seemed any point in doing so. It had been enough for Burt to know that Larry had left a month before his birth, and he had always claimed to be indifferent to the knowledge that his father had provided financial support for his maintenance. "Guilt money," he had dismissed it. Jen had used to think that, too—until she learned that Larry had become Laura.

Her hands shook as she opened the heavy steel safety box and sorted through the documents. There it was, the shabby yellowed printout of the last email Larry Childers had sent her.

Darling Jen,

By the time you read this I will be miles away, traveling to a new life and—I hope—a new self. How can I tell you the truth? But I must. The terrible, inescapable truth is that everything about my life has become not just intolerable, but impossible. *You are probably thinking I'm feeling trapped by commitment. But believe me, Jen, that is not so. It isn't marriage and a child that traps me, but the charade of a role that can never be mine, that can never feel right. It was the amniocentesis that made me see that I simply could not go on with this. I, father to a* son? *I tried to imagine it, I tried to play out in my brain the many possible scenarios of a man with his son, and knew only failure. Jen, I'm sorry, but it simply cannot be.*

The rest of the letter concerned financial matters—Larry's taking one-half of their savings and his promise to deposit a monthly sum in Jen's account for Burt's support.

Laura had wanted it all, Jen thought: the wife and child she could not acknowledge, the husband who made her feel like "the most womanly of women." But it had all begun to unravel; the "marriage" with Lennie, the revelation of the clone, the exposure of the double life, all had been looming at the time of Laura's death.

Jen thought: *if I had known, if I had known the mystery of Laura Molson, I might have wanted to kill her myself, damn her pretty brown eyes!* ○

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LATENCY TIME

Ruth Nestvold

For biographical information, we tracked Ruth Nestvold down to an Internet café in Hurghada, Egypt. She tells us that she lives in Germany where she works as a translator and tester for computer programs and documentation. Ms. Nestvold has a Ph.D. in English from the University of Stuttgart. She attended Clarion West in 1998, and has spent a couple of years teaching at German universities. She is the author of two hyperfiction works on the Web and has a number of academic publications in women's literature, science fiction, and hyperfiction. "Latency Time" is her first professional fiction publication.

"You don't remember anything else from the first epidemic?" Alis asked the old woman, and Mihailo translated it into the local dialect. The old woman shook her head.

Alis got up from the shaky chair and extended her hand to their hostess. "Hvala, Gospodja Milovanovic."

"Molim, Gospodja Petrovich," Mrs. Milovanovic said, smiling and taking Alis's hand in two thin, dry ones. She then broke out into a string of vowels and consonants that unfortunately meant nothing to Alis. Her company, Bioco, had sent her here because she at least knew a little Serbo-Croatian, but it wasn't doing much good in this part of the country. The dialects they spoke in the small towns of Montenegro were far beyond her capabilities, even beyond the capabilities of the translation program she had installed in her AI before leaving Seattle. It left her dependent on her guide and human translator Mihailo.

"She says she's sorry she can't help you more," Mihailo murmured with the slight accent she found so charming. He raised his eyebrows and continued, looking at her with a smile. "But she says she knows you will save them."

Alis barely refrained from shaking her head in disbelief. "The people here know the decision isn't mine to make, don't they?"

The warmth of unvoiced laughter still had not left Mihailo's eyes. "But you are a Petrovich."

"Petrovich," the old woman repeated, nodding, and squeezed Alis's hand.

"You can tell her I'll do what I can," Alis said, her lips pursed. From what

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she had seen of the region, it would be worth the time and energy Bioco would need to clean it up. At the beginning of the century, Bioco built its reputation on neurochemiologic products, but now they had expanded to one of the biggest biotech companies in the world, with their fingers in all kinds of profit-making pies. For their part in the Montenegro operation, they'd get a healthy cut in the profits from the resort Merriot-Intercontinental wanted to build on the shores of Lake Skutari to the south. The clean-up would benefit everyone in the area, however, not only those near the lake.

She waited until Mihailo finished speaking and drew her hand out of Mrs. Milovanovic's grasp. "Dovidjenja," she said and turned for the door. Mihailo murmured a few more soft words to the gray-haired woman and followed.

Outside, the sun was brighter than was probably healthy. Bioco wouldn't like that. But Alis did. You didn't often get that intense quality of light in Seattle—which was one of the reasons the Puget Sound area had weathered the environmental upheavals of the last few decades better than many other regions.

She lifted her wrist and spoke into her mobile AI unit. "Sophie, make a note to check ultraviolet radiation levels at the next opportunity."

Mihailo fell into step next to her and she gave him an abstracted smile that involuntarily became wider and more sincere. Her guide was an attractive man, and he had a way of looking at her that made her toes curl, his eyelids drooping suggestively over dark brown eyes.

Professional, that was the ticket. "It's strange the survivors of the first epidemic all remember so little."

Mihailo shrugged. "It was forty years ago. Many are old. And much has happened since then."

"All the more reason to look into it now."

"But it is not a part of your job for Bioco, is it?"

Alis shook her head. "They don't even know. All they want are samples and a report on the area."

Mihailo took her elbow and steered her away from their e-car. "Let me show you something, Ali."

Alis laughed. "You are always showing me something!" Yes, he was very happy to show her every treasure of history or scenery he could find. But he never seemed very happy to take her to survivors of the epidemics. Perhaps he was afraid she'd find something that had a bearing on the extent of the pollution in the area, something that would keep Bioco from providing their assemblers and enzymes to clean up his home.

He led her into the town center of Pljevlja, halting in front of an astonishingly beautiful house, deserted now. Despite the destruction of the roof and the corner of one wall, it was an impressive sight, the front wall covered in calligraphic inscriptions, still discernible.

"Turkish," Mihailo said.

"What a shame," Alis murmured. The wonders Mihailo found for her no longer surprised her. He was selling his country, after all—trying to persuade the representative of a big corporation that it was worth saving. She wondered how he would like it once it was turned into a Disneyland attraction.

Mihailo led her down another street, heading for a minaret visible in the distance. They turned a corner, and there was the mosque, untouched by the ravages of war and decay she saw everywhere else around her.

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"The Pasha Gazi Husein Mosque," Mihailo said.

Alis approached the arched doorway. "It's all so exotic. Like the Arabian Nights."

"Too exotic. Once three worlds met and meshed here."

They entered the dim interior of the former mosque, now a museum. Alis shook her head. "A myth, Misha. That has always been a myth."

Intricate designs in gold and blue covered the walls. "No," Mihailo said. "People can get along very well if those in power do not use their differences for their own purposes." He abruptly turned and left the mosque.

Alis followed him, wondering—not for the first time—what his agenda was.

That evening, she called her fiancé Philip from her hotel room in Podgorica. It had been a long day. From Pljevlja, they'd driven through the breathtaking canyon of the Tara River, stopping in villages along the way to take soil, water, and plant samples. Pollutant levels were high, but not so high that it would make the proposed project economically unfeasible for Bioco and its partners. Alis felt good. She liked it when her company's patented assemblers and enzymes could be used for a good purpose; they'd make this beautiful spot safe to live in again. She couldn't help a twinge, though, when she thought about what the cost would probably be.

Philip's secretary put her through to his office right away, and he appeared on the screen, immaculate as always, his blond hair sleek and his suit without a wrinkle.

"Hello, dear," he said with a smile. "How are things in the backwaters of Europe?"

"Wonderful. I didn't care for Belgrade much, but here it's beautiful. It'll be perfect for the resort project. Tourists could get everything—Italian, Oriental, Roman, you name it."

"And the lake?"

"We didn't get there today. We'll head over tomorrow. It's only about half an hour from here."

"Any chance we'll manage a virtual meeting some time in the next few days?" Philip asked with an intentionally lecherous grin.

Alis chuckled and shook her head. "Backwater was the right word. Belgrade is as good as it gets. The stupid war at the turn of the century put them back decades."

"Hey, don't complain. If not for that stupid war, we might never have met."

"I might never have been born, you mean."

"So how does it feel, going back to the roots?"

"Strange. Because of my name, people act as if I'm some kind of savior. Maybe they think I have their best interests at heart rather than the company's."

"It's probably simpler than that, Ali. They're hoping you'll save them from environmental disaster. They would have treated you the same way if your name was Smith."

"I don't think so. I've been talking to a lot of villagers, looking into what happened in the first epidemic—"

"Why are you doing that?" Philip interrupted her.

Alis stared at his image in the screen. Why did his voice suddenly sound so short? "I thought it would be a good opportunity. The epidemic in Montenegro was such a fluke—no one has ever been able to figure it out. It preceded the first pandemic by more than ten years."

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"That's impossible to solve now," Philip said casually—too casually. "You don't need to know about it."

"I'm just curious." She shrugged, hoping her imitation of nonchalance was better than his. "I did my MA thesis on the environmental causes of the pandemics, after all."

"Stick with the job at hand, Ali. Bioco might not be very happy to find out you're using a business trip for private research."

Alis nodded, wondering why Philip was so worried about what she did in her spare time as long as she got the job for Bioco done. She would look into the epidemic as much as she pleased. Certainly, she didn't have to know about it, but it was a riddle, and Alis had never turned down a chance at solving a riddle in her life.

She concluded her call to her fiancé quickly, more determined than ever to continue her research on the side. All she had to do here was take samples and vids and write a report and make a recommendation. And she already knew what her recommendation would be.

She detached her mobile AI from the wristband unit and slid it into the slot on her desktop machine.

"Sophie," Alis began, "how well have the adjustments to your translation program been progressing?"

"I can understand a little now, but I would need more input before I could translate for you."

Alis tapped the table with her forefinger, biting her lower lip. "Could you go over the interviews I had with the villagers again? I'm not sure if I can trust Mihailo. Perhaps if you analyze the files, you can find out if there's something suspicious about his translations."

"But my source of information for the local dialect *is* Mihailo."

"Still. Maybe you can find something that doesn't quite fit."

"What am I looking for?"

"I don't know. Words he translates differently from one interview to the next. Or different words that he translates the same. Some kind of inconsistency."

"That might be a result of dialectical differences."

"Just do it, Sophie, okay?"

"Certainly."

While Sophie was working, Alis went out to the balcony of her hotel room, leaned on the railing, and looked out over the Morača River. Directly across the water was the old city and the Turkish fort, an impressive ruin situated where the Ribnica fed into the Morača. Once, a ruin like that would have been flooded with spotlights on a summer night. There was no reason for that now, because there were next to no tourists to impress. Most people avoided the health hazard that was Europe, unless they had the newest medical technology at their disposal. Or were Europeans themselves. Or thought they were invincible. That kind would always be around.

Alis looked at the moon's reflection in the river, distorted by the ripples on the water. The Balkan wars—from which her own grandparents had fled—had destroyed much of the infrastructure here, but the epidemic had occurred in a mountainous region that had one of the highest rainfall totals in this part of the world. Pollution levels were high, as they were throughout Europe, but it was hard to believe they had been high enough back then to nearly wipe out whole villages.

It had been the water that had caused the first catastrophic pandemic,

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the Syrian Flu of '19. The Water War between Turkey and Syria had worsened the fresh water crisis in the region, and widespread use of untreated sewage had furthered the development of a new strain of cholera; a mutated form that spread easily from one person to the next, not only through contaminated water itself. Thirty million people had died. And it was only the beginning.

The international community hadn't paid much attention to the epidemics in Yugoslavia when they occurred; the same year, a dramatic rise in the sea level had governments around the world too concerned with their own problems to care. It wasn't until the first great pandemic hit that a few people remembered reports of an epidemic in Montenegro over a decade earlier. Some experts thought perhaps it had been a precursor of the virulent international epidemics that began to sweep the world in waves, but by that time it was too late to determine anything conclusive.

Alis doubted they were related. The pandemic of '19 had originated in the Mediterranean, but there the resemblance ended. There was water here. Lots of water. And forty years ago it wouldn't have been as acid as it was now, or as polluted as the water of Syria in '19.

"Ali."

Alis turned from her contemplation of the river to the balcony next to hers. Mihailo raised a bottle in her direction. "Care to join me?"

The moonlight coated his dark curls in silver and she smiled. "What is it?"

"Grk," he said. "Much more appealing than the name. A specialty from the islands in the Adriatic. Croatian. Like you."

Alis laughed, silver as the tint of moonlight in Mihailo's hair or the visible ripple on the water. "Then how can I resist?"

When she let herself out of her room, Mihailo stood in his door, waiting for her, two glasses in one hand and the bottle in the other. He waved her through to his balcony and followed.

"Do you know anything about my country's history?" he asked as he poured her a glass of the dark liquid.

She shook her head. "Not much. Tito. Yugoslavia. The war. The epidemic. What you've told me since you started babysitting me." She smiled again and took a sip of the wine. It was heavy and fruity and dry, like a fine sherry.

Mihailo put the bottle on the floor, leaned against the railing, and took a sip from his own glass. "So you don't know why people are so convinced you are a savior?"

The ironic lilt in his voice was not lost on Alis, but she couldn't blame him. She found it pretty ridiculous herself. "No."

"Petrovic was the name of Danilo I, the prince-bishop in the eighteenth century who fought off the Turks and founded the Petrovic-Njegos dynasty."

"How could a bishop found a dynasty?" Alis asked sarcastically.

"The succession went from uncle to nephew."

"There are no Turks to fight now."

Mihailo smiled, slow and intimate. "No, but there is a world to save."

"And since my name is coincidentally Petrovich, I am supposed to save it."

Mihailo nodded, and his eyes teased her over the rim of his glass.

She looked at him directly, resisting the urge to respond to his Southern European flirtatiousness. "What do you want, Misha?"

He shrugged. "What they all want. I want you to save my home."

Alis leaned back against the balcony wall and took another sip of the heavy wine. It was probably loaded with trace metals, but she'd detox when

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she got back, so she could afford it. She looked out over the city, serene in the moonlight. "Are you sure that's what you want?" she asked quietly. "The peace is so soothing here. I wonder if you can appreciate it."

"Peace," he repeated and turned, propping his elbows on the railing.

"That's right, peace. Sure, we've seen a few ghost towns, but there's no separation between city and burbs here, no marauding bands of have-nots to protect yourself from. That's my home; that's what Seattle is like. If you leave the corporate zones, you either have to take a fast train or an armored car. The kind of car we've been driving wouldn't have a chance. I don't think I've ever felt so safe in my life."

Mihailo looked at her over his shoulder, his expression inscrutable in the moonlight. "Would you still feel safe if you had to live here?"

"I—" she began and stopped. She had just thought with relief of detoxing when she got home. Would she enjoy the glass of Grk as much if she didn't have that option?

He turned his face toward the river, and she examined his profile, the high cheekbones, Roman nose, and tight lips. "You might not be safe in a car outside the city, but the water is safe to drink, isn't it?" he asked.

Alis nodded, even though he wasn't looking at her.

Mihailo indicated the river below them. "Nature is coming back after the dry years, but people still slowly poison themselves. They need the assemblers from Bioco, Alis." He stalked over to where she leaned against the wall and placed his free hand next to her head, palm flat on the stucco. "Do you know what the infant mortality rate is here?" he asked, gesturing with the glass of Grk.

"I read about it—"

"Almost 150."

"That's nothing compared to London or Paris—"

"A 150 children who didn't live to play in this peaceful, poisonous river," he said, leaning into her, his breath hot on her cheek. "Per thousand. That's 15 percent."

Alis moved away from him. "Okay, maybe it was thoughtless of me to admire the tranquillity, to even dare think it would be worth keeping. But the price for Bioco's help will be high."

He shrugged. "The price is always high."

Alis finished her wine and placed the glass on the table. "I think we're on the same side."

Mihailo grinned and finished his glass too, then threw it over his shoulder in a cartoon Slavic gesture that made her laugh. "Yes."

"Thanks for the wine." She extended her hand.

"My pleasure," he said, taking her hand in both of his. "But why so short?"

"No time," Alis said, businesslike. "I still have work to do."

Before he let her go, he raised her hand to his lips, an archaic mannerism that turned her insides to jelly in two seconds flat.

She let herself into her own room, took a deep breath, and leaned against the door. On the other side of the hotel room she could see that Sophie was done with the analysis, the wait symbol gone from the screen. She sat down at the table and scrolled quickly through the results.

"That bastard," she muttered beneath her breath. "That fucking bastard."

Alis barely let Mihailo out of her sight the next morning when they visit-

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ed the Podgorica airport south of the city, accompanied by a fleet of officials. While the mayor was unpleasantly effusive, Mihailo was his same self-assured, casual self. Try as she could, she found it hard to imagine him part of a conspiracy. No one could have known she intended to interview survivors of the epidemics when she arrived, since she had told no one of her plans. So how could the government have planted all those people on such short notice? Mihailo could hardly have done it on his own.

The effusive mayor led them around the little airport, assuring them the location was suitable for expansion, that there would be no problem with extensive tourist traffic, and Alis watched Mihailo, trying to detect duplicity, trying to understand why.

When they were finally in their car alone and on their way south, she was about to explode with unsaid accusations.

"Did you not sleep well, Ali?" Mihailo asked, looking at her with concern.

"No." She paused. "I had Sophie do an analysis of my interviews with the villagers."

"Sophie?"

"My AI."

"Ah, yes. I forgot you have given a personality to a machine."

Alis resisted the urge to reply. It was true. She had programmed Sophie to be a perfect colleague and friend.

"Don't you want to know what her conclusions were?" she asked, not taking her eyes off of him.

He continued to watch the road ahead, but a slight smile played around his generous lips. "I'm sure you will tell me."

"As far as Sophie can determine, to all intents and purposes the villagers I spoke to about the epidemic were reciting from a script."

Mihailo nodded, his eyes still on the road. No surprise, no alarm, just acknowledgment. Alis didn't know what to make of it.

"With dialectical variations, they said the same thing about the epidemics—the same choice of words, the same phrases," she persisted. "Don't tell me you didn't know."

"I knew."

"Then explain yourself!"

"How can I? I had nothing to do with it."

"Yeah, right."

"I swear. All I tried to do was hide it from you."

"That's what I'm accusing you of!"

"No. You are accusing me of being responsible. That's different."

"Huh?"

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"We are on the same side, Ali," he said quietly.

Alis stared out the window of the car, watching the still forested hills of Crna Gora—Black Mountain, Montenegro—pass by. "I don't think so."

"Yes," Mihailo insisted.

The mountains of Montenegro were much rockier than those of the Pacific Northwest, the trees stunted in comparison. At regular intervals between the larger patches of forest were patches of gray stone, a harsh but beautiful refrain. Still, from everything she had read and heard, the forests were healthier here than in the once fertile regions of Central Europe.

"Then what are you trying to hide?" Alis finally asked, not turning away from the view out the window.

Mihailo was silent so long she finally looked at him again. When he noticed her eyes on him, he shrugged. "My suspicions."

He turned off the main road abruptly and she didn't reply. When he pulled into a small gravel parking lot and got out, Alis followed. They hiked up a low, rocky hill, and at the top of the rise, he stopped in front of her.

"Skadarsko Jezero," he said. "Home."

Alis joined him and the breath caught in her throat. Laid out before her was Lake Skutari, a majestic expanse reaching to mountains of gray and green far beyond. On all sides, the hills rose up at forty-five degree angles from the water, and here and there out of the middle of the lake itself, forming islands and peninsulas.

"Is it good enough for Bioco to buy?" he asked, a trace of bitterness in his voice.

"Yes."

"Once there were so many fish in this lake, tourists did not even need a fishing license. And the fishermen still caught 1000 tons of fish a year." His voice was distant, the humor she had grown used to gone.

Alis didn't say anything for a while, and they stood looking out over the lake.

"According to the studies Bioco ran," she finally said, "Virpazar would be the most favorable location for a resort. Could we go there now?"

"Later. Now I would like to take you to another village where perhaps you will find an answer to your questions."

It was a little town near the Albanian border, a few dozen houses, no more. Compared to the other places Mihailo had shown her, there was nothing exotic about it, just anachronistic, an impression strengthened by the living room of the house where the women had gathered. The walls were covered with pictures and knickknacks, a jumble of memorabilia, mementos of a life. There was no trace of the twenty-first century, no sign of AI units or networked appliances anywhere, not even a computer.

"Meet the survivors of the epidemic who live in this particular village, Alis. All twelve of them."

"All women?" Alis asked.

"Yes."

"Have any died since then?"

"Certainly. But no men. They all died in the epidemic."

He turned to the women sitting in a circle in the living room. The youngest was perhaps forty-five and the oldest nearly seventy. They all wore colorful shawls over their heads and tied beneath their chins. Like the house, the women looked as if time had passed them by.

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"Ovo je Gospodja Petrovich," Mihailo told the women, and they looked at Alis, smiling.

"Dobar dan," Alis said.

"Is your Sophie listening?" he asked over his shoulder.

"My AI is on."

"Good. It will check up on me."

"But how do I know you didn't plant these women?"

Mihailo smiled at her, a smile that didn't even come near his eyes. "Ah, Alis, I wish I had."

He turned back to one of the younger women and began to question her, translating quickly after each response. The woman had only been a girl of six at the time of the epidemics, and she couldn't remember much. She had been sick for many weeks, and when she recovered, nearly half the village was dead. No, she couldn't remember the symptoms, only that she was very sick. They said it was the water, but she didn't know. No, she didn't know who said it was the water—everyone said that. They always boiled it after that. She had been so young, she said to Alis apologetically, she was sorry she couldn't remember more. Mihailo asked her a little about her life after the epidemic, and she became much more responsive. She told them how she and her mother had to come to this village to live with her aunt because her father had died in the epidemic. Many people had gone because there was so little left.

Mihailo repeated his questions to the circle of women, and they repeated their answers, again and again. No, she couldn't remember her symptoms, but she had been very sick. When she recovered, nearly half the village was dead. Her husband, son, brother had died in the epidemic. They said it was the water. The same words, exactly the same words were repeated so often, Alis could almost imagine she was beginning to understand the dialect herself. Mihailo's voice wove in and out of the women's refrain, the sing-song tale of death and sickness, over and over. And all of the dead were men, always men, from boys of fifteen to fathers of forty-five. This was no sickness Ali was familiar with. But what? A knot began to form in the pit of her stomach.

Then every time Mihailo asked about after, or before, or now, the sing-song was gone, and the women's voices took on more life and detail; one remembered the color of the relatives' car when they drove away, another the first meal they ate in a new village, another the time when they went back and couldn't even find a grave.

"No," Alis whispered.

Mihailo looked over his shoulder at her, and his eyes said "yes."

Those men had not died of an epidemic and these women would never visit their graves. Alis felt ill.

Alis could barely touch her meal of *sogan dolma,* a local specialty of stuffed onions, but she was partaking heavily of the Grk.

"So you think the epidemic is a cover-up," she said, pushing the food around on her plate. After visiting Virpazar, they had continued on to Sveti Stefan, a small island near the coast, once connected to the mainland. The rise in sea level had destroyed the original land bridge, so the inhabitants had simply raised it. Now, however, tourism had dropped off and many of the once noble hotels and restaurants stood empty.

"Ali," Mihailo said reprovingly, looking from her plate to her glass.

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"But how did they do it?" Alis asked, ignoring his admonishments and taking another deep drink from her glass. "How did they make the women forget?"

He shrugged.

"You know," she stated. "Just like you knew the epidemic was no epidemic. You know and you're not telling. Why did you try to hide this from me? So my company wouldn't turn down the project?"

Mihailo shook his head. "You don't want to know."

"If you don't tell, I'll recommend the project be turned down for sure."

They sat at a table overlooking the Adriatic, the remnants of a decadent sunset slowly leaking across the horizon. Anyone watching would have thought them a couple from some contaminated European metropolis on a romantic vacation together. "I know nothing for certain," Mihailo said. "I only suspect."

"And what do you suspect?"

He finished his glass of Grk and poured himself another from the bottle standing between them. "Have you told anyone from Bioco that you are researching the epidemic?" he asked in return.

It took her a moment to realize the significance of the question. And a moment more to realize the significance of Philip's reaction when she'd told him.

Alis took a shuddering breath. "No."

Mihailo said nothing, but his eyes said yes.

"You think Bioco had something to do with it?"

He tried to take her hand but she pulled away. "The government here has business contacts with your company going back decades," he said. "That is why they contacted Bioco about the Skutari project and not Hypersystems or some other bioengineering firm."

"But you can't prove anything."

"Other than the business contacts, no."

Alis leaned back in her chair and looked out at the colors bleeding away over the water. She knew he was right. Her denial had been instinctive, emotional; logic told her it all fit too well. Bioco had built its reputation at the beginning of the century on a chemical process to treat trauma disorders that involved altering memories—a perfect tool for a morally bankrupt government that wanted to quiet its unruly provinces. They might not have gotten away with it if the international community hadn't been so worried about its own problems at the time.

Forty years. It would be hard to prove now.

"What are we going to do?" she asked quietly.

"Nothing."

"Nothing." Alis imagined what would happen if she went back and accused Bioco of participating in war crimes—one of the most powerful corporations in the United States, which was run by corporations. She'd lose her job, Montenegro wouldn't get the assembler technology, and Bioco would probably argue that Yugoslavia had gotten the drugs on the black market and they had nothing to do with it anyway. She took a deep breath. "That's why you tried to hide it from me, tried to translate the women's words in such a way that I wouldn't notice."

Mihailo nodded. "You are a very moral person, Ali. I didn't know what you would do if you found out. But we need Bioco, need their technology. And we need you to get it for us."

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Alis put her elbows on the table and her forehead in her hands. Her stomach hurt. "Because I'm a Petrovich," she whispered.

"Because you're a Petrovich," Mihailo repeated. She lifted her head and looked at him, at the ironic smile that was her only encouragement.

She called Philip again the next day, after they had spent the afternoon checking the other two sites the computer analysis had chosen as possible resort locations. The camaraderie between her and Mihailo was gone, and they hadn't spoken much. The options he had given her were no options. Her conscience told her to confront Bioco with her suspicions—and her conscience told her to do whatever was necessary to save the people of Montenegro.

"Hello, dear," Philip said when his face appeared on the screen. "Have you been making progress?"

Stick to business, that was the ticket. "We've checked out all three sites. The lake is huge, and it would be a big job no matter what, but it's shallow and the pollution levels are low." Alis observed his expression carefully as she spoke.

"So you think the project should go through?"

She nodded. "There's so much here, it's hard to describe."

"But you haven't been running off doing any more private projects?" he asked teasingly, and her heart sank. Despite her doubts, she had still allowed herself to hope, hope he wouldn't ask, hope there would be no hint of suspicion behind his words. She knew Philip too well—and not well enough.

"No time," she said, doing her best to keep her voice level, ignoring the hurt. "You were right, I'm here to get a job done for Bioco."

"Good for you, Alis."

But it wasn't, it wasn't good for Alis at all.

Probably the worst thing was returning to Philip, knowing what she knew. But if she wanted to save Skadarsko Jezero, save the Tara valley and Pljevlja and Crna Gora, she had to pretend nothing had changed. She had to go back and give her report and convince Bioco to invest in Montenegro, turn the lake and the nearby region into an amusement park for rich Americans who wanted a taste of Europe and beyond.

Because she did want to save it. Honesty was a small price to pay.

The flock of government officials who brought her to the Belgrade airport to see her off were beaming, sure she would present their case positively to Bioco and consortium. She shook hands bravely with Mssrs. Yelasic, Obrenovic, Karadjordje, and Gaj, exchanging a secret look with Mihailo as she neared him. He took her hand, more tightly than proper, held it longer than necessary.

"Perhaps you will come back once the project is started?" he said. "I can be your guide again."

She gave him a smile more proper than the hand that still clenched her own. "Perhaps."

"There will always be a place in Crna Gora for a Petrovich," he murmured, squeezed her hand, and released it.

Alis looked into his dark eyes. It was an option, and her heart opened again. "I'll see what I can do." ○

—In memory of Ruth Glavinovich, 1940-1999

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INCIDENT

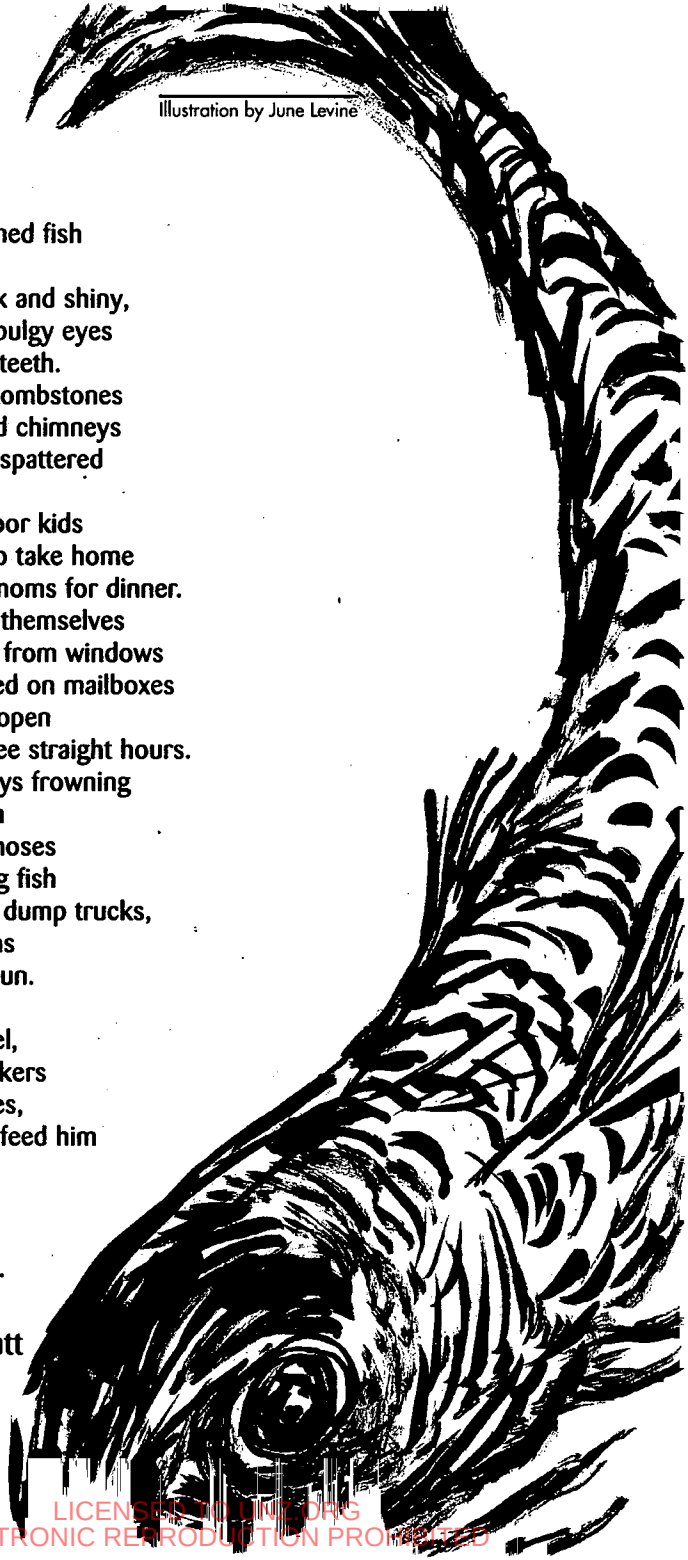

Illustration by June Levine

Two days ago it rained fish
from a clear sky,
all kinds, silver slick and shiny,
big and small with bulgy eyes
and sharp and tiny teeth.
They shattered on tombstones
and fence posts and chimneys
and car hoods and spattered
innards all over,
and the barefoot poor kids
scooped them up to take home
to their dishwater moms for dinner.
Everyone else shut themselves
inside and watched from windows
as minnows bounced on mailboxes
and jellyfish broke open
on tin roofs for three straight hours.
For the past two days frowning
big-shouldered men
with plugs in their noses
have been shoveling fish
into wheelbarrows, dump trucks,
and little red wagons
as they gag in the sun.
But one fish fell
in my full rain-barrel,
a big one with whiskers
and great green eyes,
swimming lazy as I feed him
bits of his brothers
and he grows.
Maybe someday
he'll tell me secrets.

—Tim Pratt

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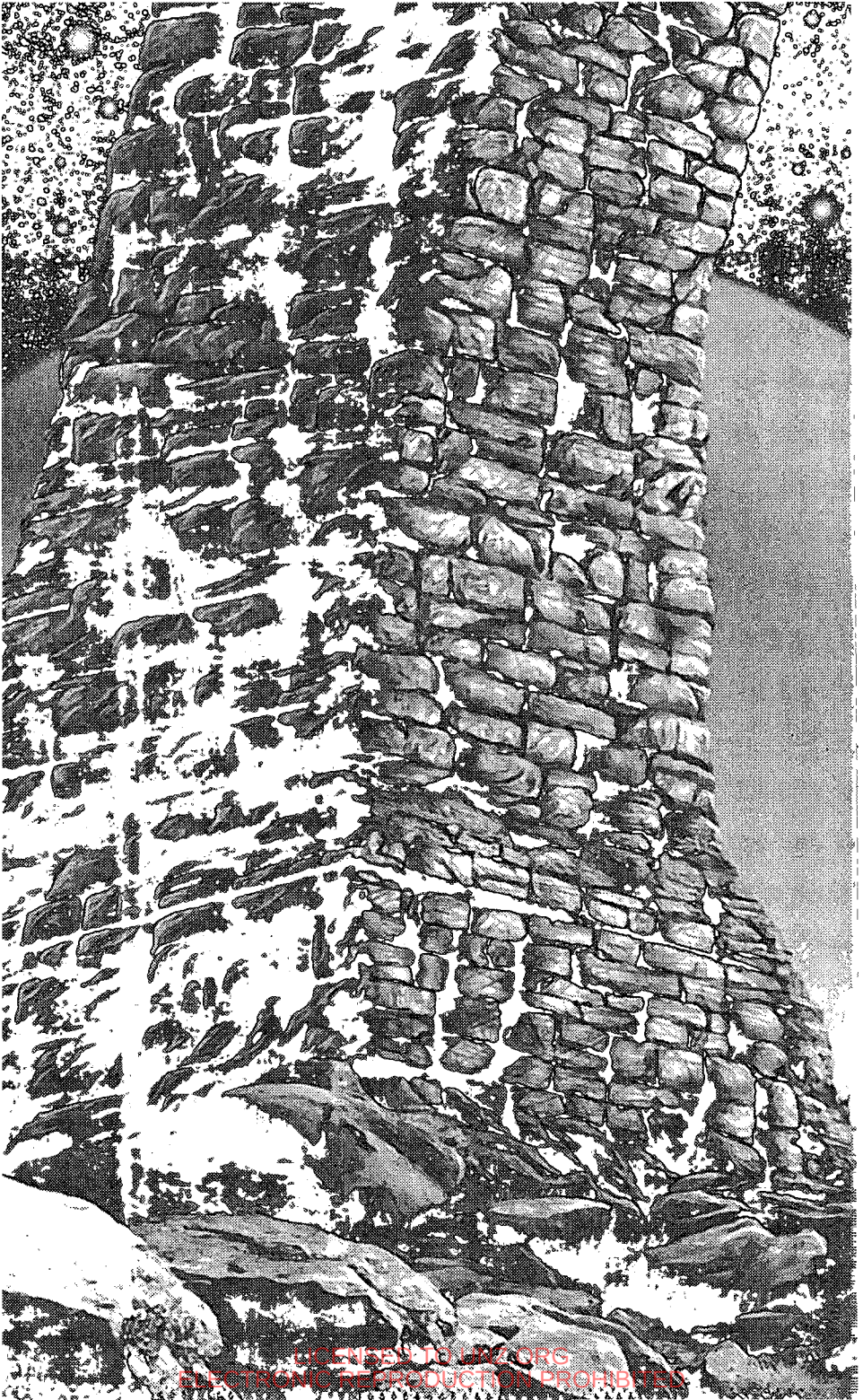

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THE GHOST PIT

Stephen Baxter

Illustration by Alan Gianni

Stephen Baxter's next books will be *Manifold 3: Origin* (January 2002), *Mammoth 3: Icebones* (April 2002), and a non-fiction prospectus called *Deep Future*. His next big project is a fat tome about human evolution. He recently returned from the Galapagos Islands where he was treading in Darwin's footsteps while doing research for the book.

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As soon as the Spline dropped out of hyperspace, our flitter burst from its belly. After our long enclosure in the crimson interior of the huge living ship, it was like being reborn.

Even though I had to share this adventure with L'Eesh, my spirits surged.

"Pretty system," L'Eesh said. He was piloting the flitter with nonchalant ease. He was about sixty years old, some three times my age, a *lot* more experienced—and he didn't miss a chance to let me know.

Well, pretty it was. The Jovian and its satellites were held in a stable gravitational embrace at the corners of a neat equilateral triangle, the twin moons close enough to the parent to be tidally locked.

And beyond it all I glimpsed a faint blue mesh thrown across the stars: an astonishing sight, a net large enough to enclose this giant planet, with struts half a million kilometers long.

I grinned. That was proof that this Jovian system was indeed a Ghost pit—a new pit, an unopened pit. Which was why its discovery had sent such a stir through the small, scattered community of Ghost hunters. And why, to be first, L'Eesh and I were prepared to fire ourselves in without even looking where we were going.

Already we were sweeping down toward one of the moons. Beneath a dusty atmosphere, the surface was brick red, a maze of charred pits.

"Very damaged landscape," I said. "Impact craters? Looks as if it's been bombed flat. . . ."

"You know," said L'Eesh laconically, "there's a bridge between those moons."

At first his words made no sense. Then I peered up.

He was right: a fine arch leapt from the surface of one moon and crossed space to the other.

"Lethe!" I swore. I couldn't understand how I hadn't seen it immediately. But then, you don't *look* for such a thing.

L'Eesh grunted. "I hope you have a strong stomach, Raida. Hily never did. Like mother like daughter—"

He had me off balance. "What about my mother?"

"Bogeys!"

And suddenly they were on us, a dozen angular craft that looped around the flitter, coming from over our heads like falling fists.

L'Eesh yanked at the stick. We flipped backward and sped away. But the bogeys were faster.

I cowered, an ancient, useless reflex; I wasn't used to being in a dogfight that humans aren't dominating.

"Remarkable accelerations," murmured L'Eesh. "An automated defense?"

The bogeys surrounded us in a tidy cloud, and hosed us with a crimson haze.

"There is nothing we can do." L'Eesh sat stoically at his controls; blood-red light glinted from the planes of his shaven scalp.

Abruptly the bogeys tipped sideways and squirted away. As the mist cleared, I let out my breath.

At first, it seemed the unexpected assault had done us no harm. We were still descending to the moon, which was flattening out from a closed-in crimson ball to a landscape beneath us.

Now my softscreen filled with the mournful face of Pohp, the agent who had brought us both here, calling from the Spline. But her image was bro-

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ken up, her words indistinct: . . . *classification of . . . Ghost . . . vacuum energy adjustment, which . . .*

A warning chimed.

"Raida, help me." L'Eesh was battling his controls. "We've lost telemetry from the portside drive."

It was worse than that. Through the crystal hull, I saw a drive pod tumbling away, surrounded by a cloud of frozen fluids and bits of hull material.

I tried my controls. With half our drive gone, they felt soggy.

I wasn't afraid, at that point. I looked up to that impossible bridge, a line drawn across the sky, aloof from our petty struggles. There are times when you just can't believe what you are seeing. A survival mechanism, I guess.

More alarms.

"Another drive pod has cut out." L'Eesh sat back, pressing his fists against his softscreen in genteel frustration.

We tipped down, suddenly buffeted by thickening air. A pink-white plasma glow gathered, hiding the stars and the land below.

There was a howling noise. My pressure suit stiffened suddenly. Peering down, I saw a hole in the hull, a ragged gash reaching right through the hull's layers; I stared, fascinated, as fluffy clouds shot past my feet.

L'Eesh turned in his couch. "Listen to me, child. We may yet survive this. The flitter is designed to keep us alive, come what may. It should be able to withstand a gliding descent from orbit on a world this size."

"But we're breaking up."

His grin was feral. "Let's hope the hull ablates slowly."

The blasted landscape flattened out further. The sky above had turned pink-brown. Rocks and craters shot beneath the prow.

There was a last instant of calm, of comparative control. I clung to my couch.

The flitter bellied down.

Orange dust flew. The nose crumpled. The inertial suspension failed, and I was flung forward. Foam erupted around me.

I was trapped, blinded, feeling nothing.

Then the foam popped and burst, quickly evaporating, and I was dropped into rust-red dirt.

. . . *Down,* just like that, deposited in silence and stillness and orange-brown light, amid settling debris.

I brushed at the dirt with my gloved hand. There were bits of white embedded in the dust: shards and splinters that crackled, the sound carrying through my suit hood. Bones?

L'Eesh was lying on his back, peering up at the muddy sky. He barked laughter. "What a ride. Lethe, what a ride!" He lifted his hands over his head, and bits of bone tumbled in the air around him, languidly falling in the low gravity.

When I was a kid, rogue Ghost cruisers still sailed through the less populated sectors of the Expansion. As parties of hunters scoured those great tangles of silvery rope, my mother would send me into the nurseries armed with knives and harpoons. Watch your back, she would call as I killed. Use your head. There is always an option. I was five years old, six.

That was how I started.

L'Eesh was the most formidable hunter of his generation. And he was here for my prey.

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Once this system, in the crowded Sagittarius Arm, was at the heart of the range of the Silver Ghosts. But the Third Expansion rolled right through here, a great wave of human colonization heading for the center of the Galaxy. Until a few decades back, some nests survived within the Expansion itself; that fast-moving front left great unexplored voids behind it. My mother, a hunter herself, took part in such actions. She never came back from her last operation, the cleansing of a world called Snowball.

But those nests have long been cleaned out. The last wild Ghosts have retreated to their pits—like the one L'Eesh and I had gotten ourselves stuck in.

I had thought I would be first here. I had been dismayed to find L'Eesh had grabbed a place on the same Spline transport as me. Though I had warily gone along with his proposal that we should pool our resources and split the proceeds, I wasn't about to submit to him.

Not even in the mess we found ourselves in now.

We dug ourselves out of the dirt.

Our med systems weren't functioning, so we put each other through brisk checks—limbs, vision, coordination. Then we tested out the equipment. Our pressure suits were lightweight skinsuits, running off backpacks of gen-enged algae. The comms system worked on pale blue bioluminescent glyphs that crawled over each suit's surface.

I poked around in the dirt. Remnants of struts and hull plates crumbled. The little ship had broken up, sacrificing the last of its integrity to save us as it was designed to, and then it had broken up some more. There was nothing to salvage. We had the suits we wore, and nothing else.

L'Eesh was watching me. His augmented eyes were like steel balls in his head; when he blinked you could hear the whir of servomotors. "It doesn't surprise you that your suit works, does it? Even here—it doesn't occur to you to ask the question."

I glared back, not wishing to give him any satisfaction.

He dug a weapon out of the scattered wreckage of the flitter; it looked like a starbreaker hand-gun. "This is a Ghost pit." He crushed the gun like a dead leaf. "Stuff like this happens. Pits are pockets of spacetime where nothing works right, where you can't rely on even the fundamental laws of physics and chemistry. But the Ghosts always arrange it so that living things are conserved—including us, and the little critters that live in our backpacks. You see? We know very little of how all this works. We don't even know how they could tell what is alive. And all of this is engineered—remember that."

I knew all this, of course. "You're full of shit, L'Eesh."

He grinned. His teeth had been replaced by a porcelain sheet. "Of course I am. Shit from battlefields a thousand years old." He had an air of wealth, control, culture, arrogance; he was effortlessly superior to me. "Pohp may be able to see us. But she can't speak to us, can't reach us." He took a deep breath, as if he could smell the air. "What now, Raida?"

There was one obvious place to go. "The bridge."

"It must be a hundred kilometers away," he said. "Our transportation options are limited—"

"Then we walk."

He shrugged, dropped the remains of the gun. There was nothing to carry, nothing to be done with the remains of the flitter. Without preamble, he set off.

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I followed. I'd sooner be watching L'Eesh's back than the other way around.

Soon our lower suits were stained bright orange, as if we were transmuting into creatures of bone and dirt ourselves.

This trapped moon was too small for tectonic cycling. The land was old, eroded to dust, mountains and crater rims worn flat. Iron oxides made the ground and the air glow crimson. On the horizon, dust devils spun silently.

We saw no animals. I spotted tiny burrows and mounds in the dirt, perhaps made by insects. A kind of lichen clung to the larger rocks. Nothing moved, save us and the dust. Not even the sun: the "days" here lasted as long as an orbit of the moon around the Jovian, which was about ten standard days.

And over it all loomed the bridge. It rose lumpily from beyond the horizon. It looked crude—almost unfinished—but it became a thread that arrowed through the clouds, making the sky stretch into a third dimension.

And what a complex sky it was. The sister moon scowled down, scarred and bitter, and the Jovian primary loomed massively on the horizon, the corners of a great celestial triangle forever frozen in place.

The Spline ship rolled over the horizon, tracking its low orbit. It was like a moon itself, a mottled, meaty moon made grey by the dusty air. Even from here I could see the big green tetrahedron on its hull, the sigil of free humanity. The leathery hull-epidermis of the Spline was pocked with sensor arrays; we had spent a lot of money to ensure our capture of any wild Ghosts was recorded and certified, to preserve the value of the hides.

Everywhere you looked—every time you dug a trench with your toe—you found more bits of bone. Perhaps there had been a vast flood, I thought, that had washed up this vast assemblage of remains. Or perhaps there had been a drought, and this was a place where animals had gathered around the drying water holes, fighting to suck at the mud, while the predators watched.

Or maybe it was a battlefield.

As we walked, L'Eesh studied me, his inhuman eyes glistening. "It looks as if we are going to spend some time together."

I didn't reply.

"So. Tell me about yourself."

"I'm not interested in playing head games with you, L'Eesh."

"So defensive, little Raida! I did know your mother."

"That doesn't give you the right to know *me*." I saw a chance to get the upper hand. "Listen to me, L'Eesh. I think I know what's going on here. . . ."

Know your prey. This was my first pit, but I had prepared myself. The Ghosts seem to use only a small number of pit types—our flitter had been designed to cope with some of the common variants—and when Pohp sent us her cryptic message, I knew what she must have been talking about.

Vacuum energy: even in "empty" space there has to be an energy level, because of quantum uncertainty. What was important for us was the effect this had—and the effect of the Ghosts' tinkering.

"Think of an atom," I said. "Like a little solar system with the electrons as planets, right? But what keeps a negative electron out of the positive nucleus?"

"Vacuum energy?"

"Right. The electron, and everything else, is surrounded by a sea of vacu-

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um energy. And as fast as the electron loses energy and tries to spiral in, the vacuum sea supplies some more. So the electron stays in orbit." I peered up at the complicated sky. "Those weapons extracted some of the vacuum energy from the substance of our flitter. Or lowered its level: something like that. All the electrons spiraled in, and molecular structures fell apart."

L'Eesh listened, his face unreadable.

Suddenly I felt naked.

I dug around among a thick patch of bones. I found a long, thin shaft that might have been a thigh-bone. I cracked it against a rock; it splintered, leaving a satisfactorily vicious point.

As we walked on I put myself through elementary drill routines.

The key resource you get from a Ghost is his hide—a perfectly reflective heat trap, with a thousand applications. Now that Ghosts are so rare, wild hides are a luxury item. People sell little squares and triangles of hide for use as charms, curios: this was, after all, a lucky species that survived the death of its sun, so the story goes.

Anyhow, if you come at a Ghost with a jabbing weapon, you should try to get your spear into the carcass along the spin axis, where the hide is a little thinner, and you won't rip it unnecessarily. Ghosts don't leave spoor, my mother used to say. So you have to cut him an asshole. You just follow the trail of excrement and blood and heat until he dies, which might take a day or two.

L'Eesh was watching me analytically. "You're, what, twenty, twenty-one? No children yet?"

"Not until I can buy them out of the Coalition draft."

He nodded. "As Hily did you. I knew her ambition for you. It's good to see it realized so well. It must have been hard for you when she died. I imagine you got thrown into a cadre by the Commissaries—right?"

"I won't talk to you about my mother, L'Eesh."

"As you wish. But here and now you need to keep your mind clear, little Raida. And you might want to think about saving your energy. We have a long way to go."

I worked with my bone spear and tried to ignore him.

We had to sleep in our suits, of course. I dug a shallow trench in the dust. I couldn't shut out the crimson light. I slept in patches.

I woke up in my own stink.

The recycled gloop from my hood nipples already tasted stale, my skinsuit was chafing in a dozen places, and I felt bruises from that landing that hadn't registered at the time. If the sun had moved across the sky at all, I couldn't see it.

It's a strange thing, but it wasn't until that second "morning" that I took seriously the possibility that I might die here. I guess I had been distracted by the hunt, my conflict with L'Eesh. Or maybe I just lack imagination. Anyhow, my adrenaline rush was long gone; I was numb, flat, feeling beaten.

Through that endless day, we walked on.

We came to what might have been a township. There was little left but a gridwork of foundations, a few pits like cellars, bits of low wall. I thought I could see a sequence, of older buildings constructed of massive marble-like blocks, later structures made of what looked like the local sandstone or else bits of broken-up marble ruins.

All of it trashed, burned out, knocked flat.

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L'Eesh, his suit scuffed and filthy, began poking around a large battleship-shaped mound of rubble.

I squatted, chewing on a glucose tab.

L'Eesh called, "You know, there's something odd here. I thought this was a fort, or perhaps some equivalent of a cathedral. But it looks for all the world as if it crashed here."

"You don't make aircraft from brick."

"Well, whatever made such a vast, ungainly structure fly through the air is gone now. Nevertheless there was clearly once a pretty advanced civilization here. On the way in I glimpsed extensive ruins. And some of those impact craters looked deliberately placed. This whole world is an arena of war. But it seems to have been a war that was fought with interplanetary weapons, and then flying brick fortresses, and at last, fire and clubs. . . ."

He laughed, fiddling with his hood. "Of course it's likely both moons were inhabited. Life could have been sparked on either moon, in some tidal puddle stirred by the Jovian parent. And then panspermia would work, spores wafting on meteorite winds, two worlds developing in parallel, cross-fertilizing. . . ."

On he talked. I wasn't interested. I was here for Ghosts, not archaeology.

I waited until he took the lead, and we walked on, leaving the ruined township behind.

Another "night," another broken sleep in the dirt. Another "day" on that endless plain.

We didn't seem to get any closer to that damn bridge. In places the surface had been blasted to glass; it prickled my feet as I staggered across it.

We had nothing to do but talk.

A lot of it was L'Eesh's refined bragging. "You know, I always wondered why the Commission is so tolerant of us, we hunters. Under the Druz Coalition, you aren't supposed to get old and rich. The species is the thing! It is not comfortable to feel one has been manipulated, controlled. But it has been glorious nevertheless."

Turned out L'Eesh had taken part in that great Ghost massacre on Snowball.

"Snowball was actually the first Ghost planet anybody found. When Ghost numbers collapsed the Commission slapped on conservation orders—some nonsense about preserving cultural diversity—but there wasn't a great deal of will behind the policing.

"When the orders were lifted, we were already in orbit. We made a huge circle around the major Ghost nest, with aerial patrols overhead, and we just worked our way in on foot, firing at will, until we met in the center. The major challenge was counting up the carcasses.

"So it went: while those nests lasted, it was a feeding frenzy. You were born too late, Raida."

"After all of that, why go on? Why risk your neck in places like this, for the last few scraps of hide?"

"Because some day there will be a last Ghost of all. I must be there when he is brought down. You know, a thousand years ago the Ghosts' pits of twisted spacetime struck dread into human hearts. They were deployed as fortresses, a great wall right across the disc of the Galaxy. Magnificent! . . . And now we hunt the Ghosts for their hides."

"Who cares? Ghosts are predators."

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"They are symbiotes," he said gently. "You have been listening to too much Commission propaganda."

As we talked we walked on, across a land like a dusty table-top.

L'Eesh kept up his dogged, unspectacular plod, hour after hour. He looked determined, sharp, as if he had plenty of reserve.

I was determined not to let my own gathering weakness show. I continued to carry that bone spear.

At the end of the third "day," we reached the bridge.

L'Eesh was breathing hard, sucking water. "Magnificent," he said. "Mad. They built a brick tower to reach to heaven! . . ."

Exhausted, filthy, uncomprehending, I peered up. About a hundred paces across, it was just a rough pile of mud bricks. And yet it towered above me, reaching up to infinity.

I went exploring.

I came to a crumbled gap in the base of the tower. I crawled into an unlit interior. My suit's low-output bioluminescent lamp glowed.

I craned my neck. The bridge rose up vertically above me, a tunnel into the sky. Metal gleamed amid the rubble on the floor.

I kicked aside half-bricks and uncovered a squat cuboid about half my height. It was featureless except for a fat red button. When I pressed the button, the cube rose magically into the air, trailing a rose-colored sparkle, like the bogeys' weapon; I kept out of the way of the wake. When I released the button, the cube dropped again.

It was pretty obviously a lifting palette.

There was another palette buried in the wall of the bridge—and further up another, and another beyond that.

"Now we know how they made their castles fly," L'Eesh said. "And how they raised this bridge." He was standing beside me, his suit glowing green. I saw he had scraped a channel in mold-softened brick with his thumb. Beneath it, something gleamed, copper-brown. "It's not metal," he said. "Not even like Xeelee construction material."

"Maybe that's the original structure."

"Yes. No suite of moons is stable enough to allow the building of a brick bridge between them; the slightest tidal deflection would be enough to bring it tumbling down. There must be something more advanced here—perhaps the moons' orbits are themselves regulated somehow. . . . The bridge itself is just a clumsy shell. The inhabitants must have constructed it after the intervention."

"What intervention?"

He sighed. "Think, child. Try to understand what you see around you. Imagine millennia of war between the two moons—"

"What was there to fight over?"

"That scarcely ever matters. Perhaps it was just that these were sibling worlds. What rivalry is stronger? Finally, the moons were ruined, serving only as a backdrop for the unending battles—until peacemakers sent down blood-red rays, vacuum energy beams that turned the weapons to dust."

"Peacemakers? Silver Ghosts?"

"Well, it's possible," he said. "Though it's not characteristic of Ghost behavior. It was a draconian solution: a quarantine of technology, the trashing of two spacefaring civilizations. . . . How arrogant. Almost human."

I felt uncomfortable discussing Ghosts with human-like motives. "What about these lift palettes?"

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"It makes a certain sense," he said. "From the point of view of a meddling Ghost, anyhow. A simple technology to help the survivors to rebuild their ruined worlds—something you surely couldn't turn into a weapon—but it didn't work out." He smiled thinly. "Instead the populations used the gifts to build this insane bridge."

"How is this going to help us find the Ghosts?"

He seemed surprised by the question. "There are no Ghosts here, child."

. . . Of course, he was right. Ghosts spread out over every world they infest. We would have seen them by now, if they were here. I'd known this, I guess, but I hadn't wanted to face the possibility that I'd thrown away my life for nothing.

I slumped to the littered floor. The strength seemed to drain out of me.

In retrospect, I can see his tactics. It was as if he had designed the whole situation, a vast trap. He waited until I had reached the bottom—at the maximum point of my tiredness, as I was crushed with disappointment at the failure of the hunt, surrounded by alien madness.

Then he struck.

The length of bone came looming out of the dark, without warning, straight at my head.

I ducked. The bone clattered against the wall. "L'Eesh—"

"It's just business, child."

My heart hammered. I backed away until my spine was pressed against the rough wall. "You've found something you want. The vacuum-energy weapons. Is that it?"

"Not what we came for, but I'll turn a profit, if I can manage to get off of this moon."

"It's not as if you need to do this," I said bitterly.

He nodded. "You have the stronger motive here. Which is why I have to destroy you." He spoke patiently, as if instructing a child. He raised the bone, its bulging end thick, hefting it like a club, and he moved toward me, his movements oily, powerful.

I felt weak before his calm assurance. He was better than me, and always would be; the logic of the situation was that I should just submit.

In desperation, I jumped onto the lift palette—it was like standing on a bobbing raft—and stamped on the button.

I rose immediately, passing beyond the reach of his swinging club. I had been too fast, faster than his reactions. The advantage of youth.

But L'Eesh easily prised another palette out of the wall and followed me up into the darkness.

My palette accelerated, bumping against walls that were as rough as sandpaper. L'Eesh's green glow followed me, bioluminescent signals flickering.

Thus our ascension, two dead people racing into the sky.

On an interplanetary scale, the tunnel arched, but from my petty human point of view it just rose straight up. All I could see was a splash of bio light on the crude brickwork around me, sliding past, blurred by my speed.

L'Eesh tried to defeat me with words.

"Imagine, Raida," he said softly. "They must have come here from across the moon, carrying their mud bricks, a global pilgrimage that must have lasted generations. What a vision! They sacrificed everything—abandoned

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their farms, trashed their biosphere down to the slime on the rocks. . . . And you know what? *The two populations must have worked together.* In the end, the war became the most important thing in their universe. More important than life, the continuation of the species."

"Insane," I whispered.

"Ah, but once *we* built vast structures, waged terrible wars, all in the names of gods we have long forgotten. And are we so different now? What of our magnificent Galaxy-spanning Expansion? Isn't that a grandiose folly built around an idea, a mad vision of cosmic destiny? Who do you think we more resemble—the warmongers or the peacemakers?"

I was exhausted. I clung to my scrap of ancient technology as it careened up into the dark.

That sleek voice whispered in my ear, on and on.

"You can never live up to Hily's memory, little Raida. You do see that, don't you? You needn't feel you have failed. For you could never have succeeded. . . . I saw your mother die."

"Shut up, L'Eesh."

"I was at her side—"

"Shut up."

He fell silent, waiting.

I knew he was manipulating me, but I couldn't help but ask. "Tell me."

"She was shot in the back."

"Who?"

"It doesn't matter. . . . She was killed for her catch, her trophies. Her death wasn't dishonorable. She must even have expected it. We are a nation of thieves, you see, we hunters. You shouldn't feel bitter."

"I don't feel anything."

"Of course not. . . ."

His brooding glow was edging closer.

I closed my eyes. What would Hily have done?

Use your head. There is always an option.

I took my hand off the button. The palette rocked to a halt. "Get it over," I panted.

Now he had nothing to say; his words had fulfilled their purpose. He closed, that eerie green glow sliding over the crude brickwork.

And I jammed my hand back on the button.

My palette lumbered into motion. I watched the exhaust gather into a thick crimson mist below me.

L'Eesh hurtled up into the mist, crouching on his palette—which abruptly cracked apart and crumbled. Stranded in the air, he arced a little higher, and then began to fall amid the fragments.

I sat there until my heart stopped rattling. Then I followed him down.

"My fall is slow," he said, analytic, observing. "Low gravity, high air resistance. You could probably retrieve me. But you won't."

"Come on, L'Eesh. It's business, just as you said. You know what happened. These palettes extract their energy from the vacuum sea—"

"Leaving some kind of deficit in their wake, into which I flew. Yes? And so we both die here." He forced a laugh. "Ironic, don't you think? In the end we've cooperated to kill each other. Just like the inhabitants of these desolate moons."

But now my mind raced. "Not necessarily."

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"What?"

"Suppose I head up to the midpoint of the bridge and burn my way through the wall. Pohp ought to see me and come in for me. I'd surely be enough out of the vacuum field for the Spline to approach safely."

"What about the quarantine ships?"

"They must primarily patrol the moons' low orbits. Perhaps I'd be far enough from the surface of either moon to leave them asleep."

He thought it over. "It would take days to get there. But it might work. You have something of your mother's pragmatism, little Raida. I guess you win."

"Maybe we both win."

There was silence. Then he said coldly, "Must I beg?"

"Make me an offer."

He sighed. "There has been a sighting of a school of Spline. Wild Spline."

I was startled. "Wild?"

"These Spline are still spacegoing. But certain of their behavioral traits have reverted to an ancestral state. They believe they swim in their primordial ocean. . . ."

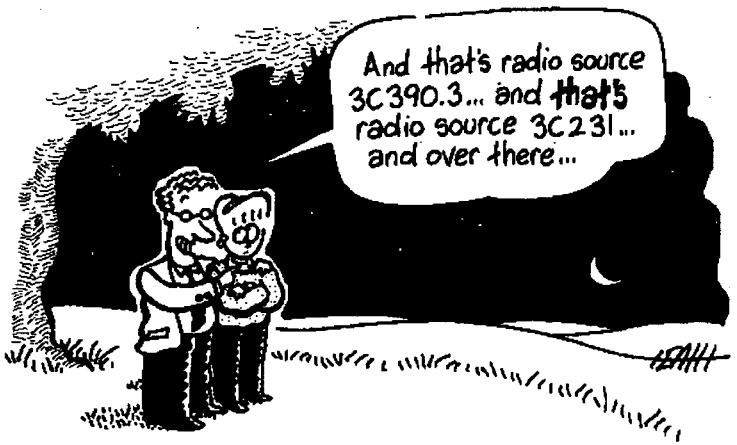
I breathed, "Nobody has ever hunted a Spline."

"It would be glorious. Like the old days. Hily would be proud." It was as if I could hear his smile.

I was content with the deal. It was enough that I'd beaten him; I didn't need to destroy him.

Not yet. Not until I know who killed my mother.

We argued percentages, all the way down toward the light. ○



Why radio astronomers often strike out.

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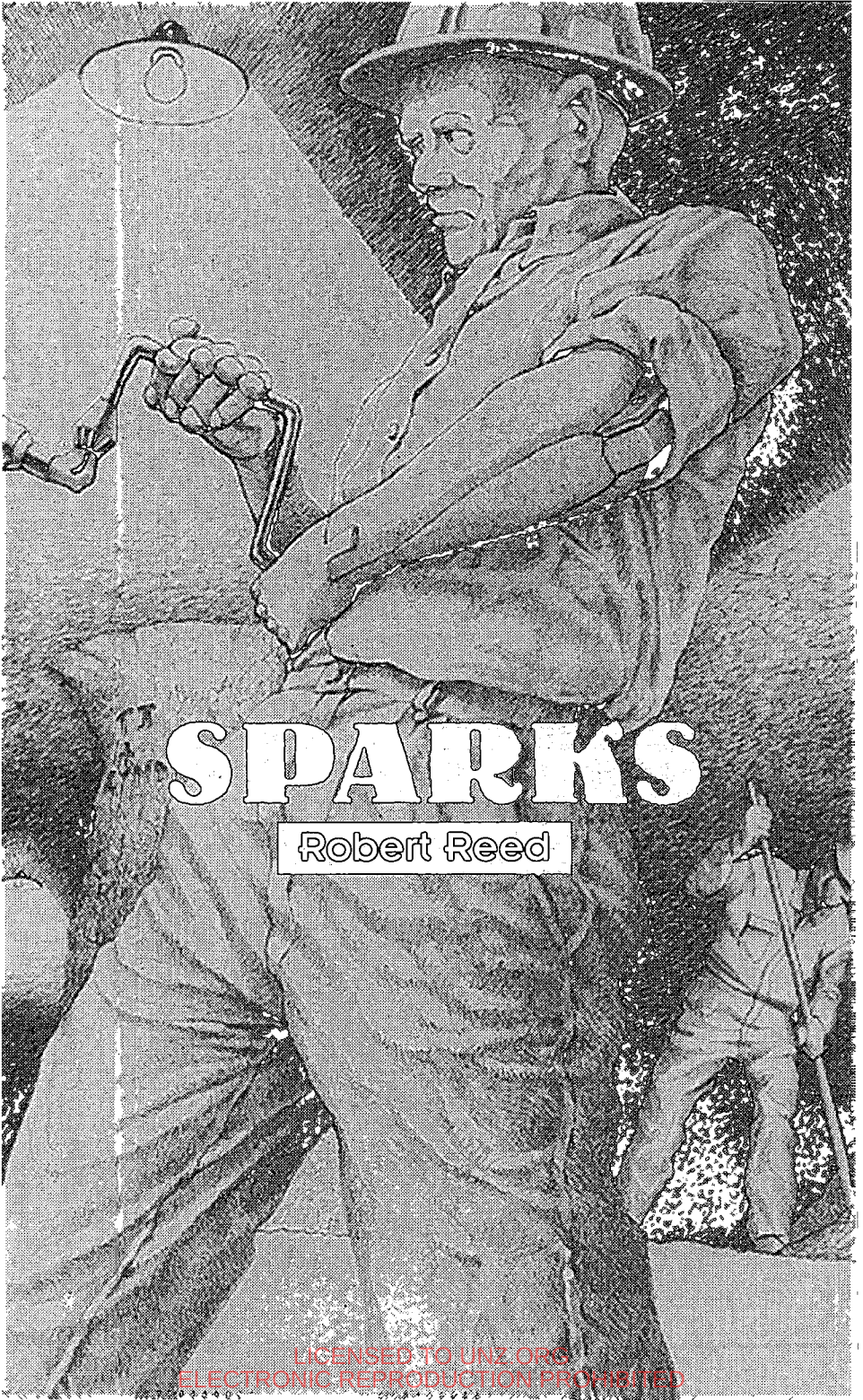

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"Sparks" was inspired by a return visit to an old chalk mine. "What were open tunnels in my youth had now been plugged or boarded over. For a few dollars, a local girl took my wife and I on a tour of a kind of half-born museum. I was thrilled, I got to thinking about the funny directions that life takes. What if your life was nothing but a series of abrupt, painless turns. . . ?"

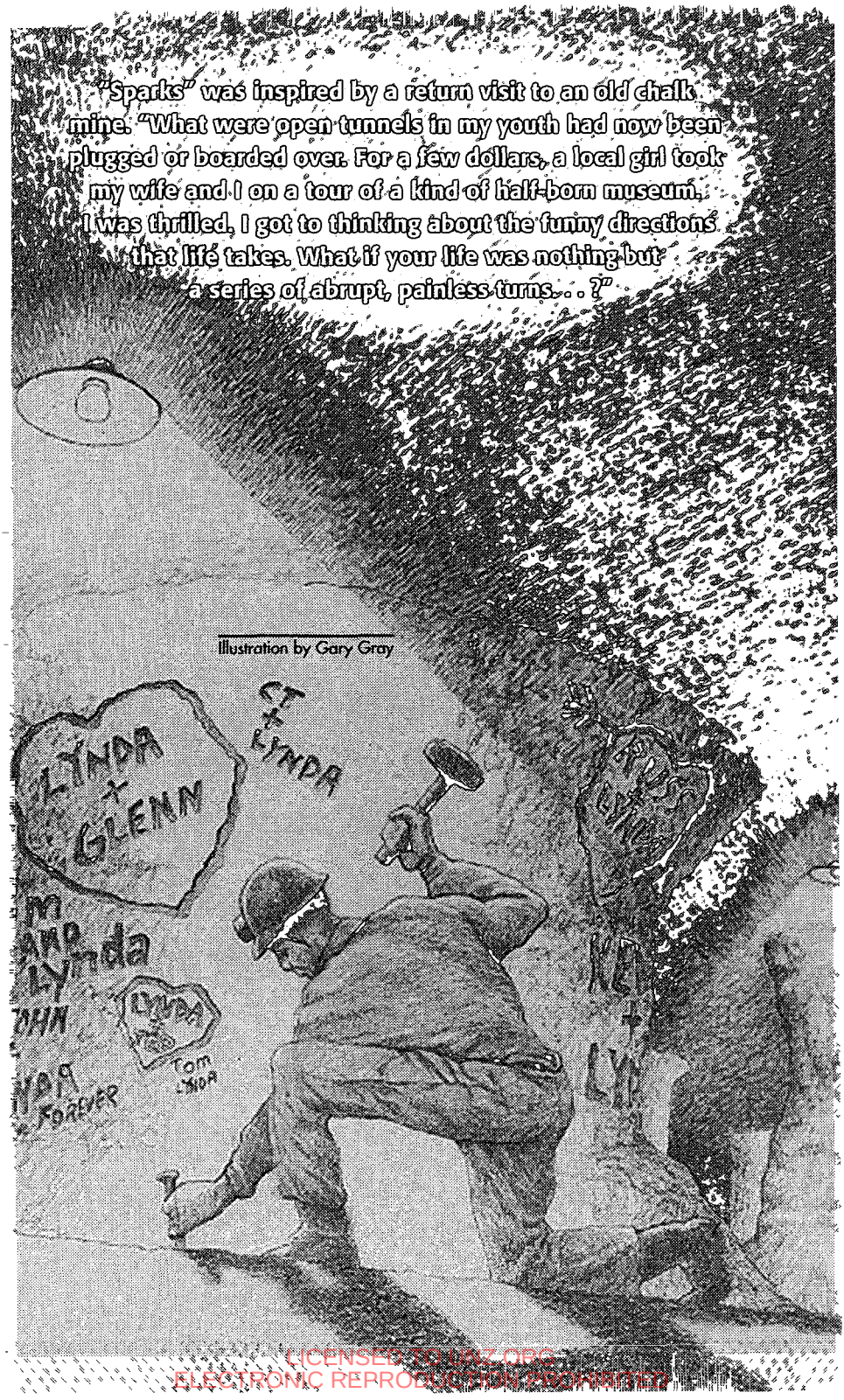

Illustration by Gary Gray

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Over morning coffee, he feels the need to lean across the old pine table, taking hold of her hands and staring into her hard blue eyes as he tells her how awfully thankful he is to have her in his life, and how astonished, and of course she asks, "Why are you astonished?" Which makes him shake his rugged face, reminding her, "You're the town beauty, Lynda. Shit, you could have had anyone—"

"I picked you," she interrupts, gently laughing at him.

"Anyone," he repeats. "And not just around Sparks. But any man would be happy to have you, anywhere. I mean that!"

Which makes her feel wonderful, warm and loved, and it's almost the perfect morning.

"What are you thinking, Lynda?"

She pulls her hands free, admitting, "I'm late."

"Be late," is his heartfelt advice.

"You know better than that," she reminds him. "If I don't work, we don't pay the bills."

He shrugs, embarrassed now.

Lynda pushes away from the table and stands. She is a tall woman, an almost six foot platinum blonde with the face and figure of a much younger woman. Yes, they make an unlikely couple. But who isn't unlikely? Isn't that what life has taught her, again and again? He is barely five foot eight and tends toward slovenly. He's wearing nothing but boxer shorts and that earnest grin, his teeth a little crooked and his thinning hair begging to be combed. His new leg looks very modern and elegant, but wearing a prosthetic is still a long ways from second nature. He stands stiffly, one hand planted on the table to help his precarious balance. A half-erect penis fills his shorts nicely. She kisses the worshipful man, and not just a little kiss. Then she treats herself to a quick grope, and he presses against her, those hard farmer hands practically clinging to her.

"Got to go," she says.

"Tonight," he begs.

"Of course," she tells him, and then she leaves with a single backward glance. Her car is an old blood-red Mercury. The farm is north and east of town, set on rolling land that has never made anyone a decent living. She takes the graveled road to Sparks, then crosses the bridge to the highway—a two-lane affair winding along the narrow river bottoms. This is a hot summer morning, but the bottomland corn—other people's corn—looks tall and deeply green. The river is a distinct bluish-brown, the colors of the sky mixing with the rich water-born silt. This is a beautiful valley, always. Lynda lives in a lovely corner of the world, and every morning drive is a reliable pleasure, regardless of the season or the temporary shape of her life. She flips on the car radio just as the national news begins. With a distant interest, she hears about the president's troubles and wildfires in California, and the French are feuding with the English, while in the Middle East, nothing ever seems to change.

A tall, windswept bluff stands south of town. Happy Jack Hill was named for a homesteader nicknamed Happy Jack for his relentless smile and good humor. He had used the bluff as a lookout point, watching for Sioux raiders much as the Pawnee had done when they lived in this valley. Today, there is a narrow graveled lot just south of the hill. A tall bronze marker tells passersby about the valley's history, and in particular, the old chalk mine. Lynda pulls off and locks the Mercury and follows a narrow rocked path

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down into a grove of oak and ash trees. A little park greets her. Picnic tables and garbage cans are clustered in what will become midday shade, and a pair of new orange outhouses stand on higher ground. A simple building has been erected against the base of the hill. It is white except for a single brown door waiting to be unlocked by her. She enters the first stuffy room, lifting windows and leaving the door hanging open. A few cheap souvenirs—caps and mugs and postcards and the like—reside on plastic racks. Her desk is on the left, and a second door is at the back of the building. There's also a utility room with a flush toilet and a toolbox and extra coffee mugs. Lynda takes a few moments to walk through each room. Then she flips the big breakers and opens the back door, walking through the mine and unlocking the exit door, pushing the heavy plywood away from the opening with a complaining shriek of cheap hinges.

This is a weekday, but summer brings a surprising number of people on their way to more popular locations. Most people notice the signs. A few will always be intrigued. "What's a chalk mine doing here?" they'll ask themselves. That's what brings her first customers. Three nuns in simple gray-and-white habits come drifting down the path, announcing their presence with quiet laughter and soft compliments. "Isn't it lovely?" asks the oldest woman. Then they notice Lynda standing in the front door, and the youngest nun says, "Hello. We'd like to see the mine."

"I want to show it to you," says Lynda.

They're pleasant women, and intelligent, and from a world that has never seemed real to her. Each notices the posted price for a tour, and the oldest nun finds the voice to ask, "Is this per person?"

"Yes. Yes, it is."

Glances are exchanged. A soundless decision is made, and each woman pulls a tiny money purse out of some deep pocket.

Lynda hangs a sign and fake clock on the front door. The sign explains to whoever comes next that she is giving a tour but will return at such-and-such time. She adjusts the clock's hands, giving herself and the nuns fifteen minutes. A large flashlight waits on a shelf beside the back door. Lynda grabs it, makes certain that it works, then warns, "It's cool underground. Fifty-six degrees, year round."

"That will feel fine," is the oldest nun's confident opinion.

Lynda knows the chalk mine better than she knows almost anything else in her life. She can talk for hours about its history and local importance. The original settlers used blocks of chalk as foundations for their new homes. But chalk is soft, and local birds have a nagging habit of pecking out holes, desperate for the minerals. In later years, the chalk was sold as additives for livestock feed and house paint. "This is the only pillar-and-room chalk mine in the country," she can tell the nuns, standing in the middle of the first room. Lights have been strung overhead; the flashlight is a simple precaution. "Miners would dig out a chamber," she explains, "leaving these columns to hold up the roof." The columns are thick and inelegant, each peppered with little drill holes and the craters left by black powder charges. "The roof is sandstone," she adds. "Run your hands up the pillars. You can feel where the rock changes its nature."

Each nun touches the gray-white face of the chalk, and then standing on their toes, they fondle the sharper reaches of pale sandstone.

"The mine was barely profitable," she tells her audience, "and it closed before World War II. When I was a girl, we would drive out from Sparks to pic-

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nic here, and explore. There were a dozen big openings at the base of the hill, and the largest was over here." She gestures at a wall of packed earth and chalk. "People would drive straight into the mine. Teenagers came at night to have parties." It's a little delicious, mentioning sin to a group of nuns. "Then twenty years ago," Lynda concludes, "the town of Sparks bought the mine and set up a nonprofit organization, and after closing most of the entrances, for safety reasons, we began developing the area as a tourist site."

"How long have you worked here?" asks the youngest nun. She is almost pretty, particularly in the gloomy half-light of the mine. The lack of makeup doesn't show. Her eyes sparkle, and her smile is warm and natural.

"I've worked here since I graduated from college," Lynda admits. "Nearly two decades now."

What she hopes for is a compliment or two, but nobody mentions her youthful good looks. Instead, the oldest nun points, asking, "What's this? This mark on the wall?"

"That's a fossil," Lynda replies.

"Really? What of?"

"A crinoid." Using her free hand, she draws a wavy shape in the air. "Crinoids looked like flowers, except they were animals." She smiles, adding, "The mine is filled with fossils. Even the chalk was built from the remains of tiny shellfish that lived here when all of this was a shallow tropical sea. Eighty million years, and billions of shellfish ago."

The tour takes twelve minutes. There are only a few more questions, none original, and the nuns show no interest in exploring the darkest depths of the mine. Lynda leads her guests to the exit door, thanking them for coming and pointing the way back to the parking lot. Then she walks back to her little building, opening the front door and taking down her sign and fake clock.

A small boombox is set on a high shelf. Lynda turns it on and listens to a mixture of new country and old rock-and-roll. Sitting at her office desk, she looks out the only window, noticing when the sun is suddenly obscured by clouds. She looks at herself for a moment, then rises and passes through the tiny rooms. As she glances out the door, a man steps into view. He walks with a long deliberate gait. He's wearing jeans and a simple white T-shirt. He sees her watching him, and he says, "Hey, there." He asks, "What are you doing here, all by yourself?"

"Working," she says, her voice flat and quick.

"Working, huh?" He is tall and naturally strong. He has a wide smile and a sturdy, intense laugh. "Don't you get worried? A pretty thing like you, alone. And anyone can come off that highway. Anytime."

She says, "Do you want something?"

"A tour," he says.

She doesn't speak.

He climbs the plain wooden stairs and comes inside, saying, "I want a tour. Take me on a tour."

"No," she says.

Then he says, "I've got a gun."

She says nothing.

"Don't you believe me? I can show it to you, if you want."

Lynda says, "No."

Then she looks over her shoulder, saying, "My partner's giving a tour now. He's going to get back anytime—"

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"You're alone," the man tells her. "Don't lie to me.

Lynda closes her mouth.

"Lock that door and take me back there."

She does what she is told. When she reaches for her flashlight, he says, "Don't. Leave it hanging."

They walk into the perpetually chilled air, into the dampness and the clinging scent of chalk dust. Then he says, "Stop. Turn around."

They stand close. Lynda's legs are weak now. She looks at the young smiling face, and with a whisper, she asks, "What do you want?"

"A tour," he repeats. Then he grunts and asks, "Are you sure you don't want to see my gun?"

She doesn't speak.

"It's awful big," he promises.

"Show me," she says weakly.

He opens his jeans, letting his cock fall out.

She glances down, and then looks up at his face.

"Talk," he urges.

"It is a big gun," she admits.

"Want to touch it?" he asks.

"Always," she says, and she starts to reach with both hands.

They walk back to the highway together, a light cool rain falling. He drives for a trucking company, passing through the county every week or two. He kisses her on the lips and says, "See ya, Lynda," with an easy fondness, and he climbs up into the high cab. She waves as he pulls out onto the empty highway. The only other vehicle in the asphalt lot is a small red pickup truck. She barely looks at the truck, walking back down the trail to her plain white office.

The phone is ringing when she arrives.

"Were you giving a tour?" the voice asks.

She glances at her shirt, saying, "I was."

"Busy today?"

"A little bit," she admits. Then she says, "How about you?"

"That pump's out again. Can't irrigate till I fix it."

"I guess not," she says, glancing out the window. The sun is bright and happy now.

"Otherwise," he says, "we could have lunch together."

She says, "Tonight," with a practiced ease. Then she says his name softly, with a natural tenderness.

"Tonight," he repeats. "Take care, Lynda."

She hangs up and starts hunting for her lunch. But it isn't where it should be, which prompts her to return to the parking lot, fishing her keys out of her pocket as she walks. The car is a new Buick. Her lunch waits inside a plastic cooler that's hiding in the cavernous trunk. She knows what was packed, but still, she opens the lid and looks for herself. It's an old habit. She sits in the driver's seat for a moment, flipping down the visor to study a pair of photographs. The man went to high school with her. He looks tall and prosperous. The children are boys, and they look very much like their father. They have sweet, boyish smiles despite being nearly grown. She doesn't like having adult children, but then again, she's obviously kept her figure despite three big boys dropping out of her.

Lynda starts back to her office, carrying the cooler with both hands. She's

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wondering if she will see those boys tonight. Probably not, but these things are impossible to predict. Years of experience have taught her that from one moment to the next, there's no knowing when it will happen next.

That's what she is thinking. That's where her mind resides when she notices the man standing outside her office door. In that first little moment, she waits for something that feels like recognition. But the face isn't at all familiar, which means that he is a stranger here. Not a terribly handsome man, is he? Not as tall or fit as her typical lover. But he has a certain energy that bubbles and twirls, and he has smart staring eyes that fix on her and won't let go.

Lynda asks, "Would you like a tour?"

He says nothing.

She stops short of her office. The sun is dimmer now, obscured by a dusty haze. She can see most of the parking lot, and the only car is an old rust-colored minivan. Her cooler is Styrofoam now. She hadn't noticed it change. Setting the cooler on the ground, she sees the man smiling, and staring, and she has to ask, "Have we met?"

"I've been hunting for you, Lynda."

But if she knows him, then a galaxy of memories should offer themselves to her. That's how these things work, always.

"I've been looking everywhere, Lynda."

Something that may or may not be a memory tickles her now. She puts on a weak little smile, and then says, "I've always been here."

He laughs, telling her, "That's a good one."

A cold fear begins to grow.

"We met in college," he explains. "Does that help you?"

She has to admit, "It doesn't, no."

"A group of us came here for the weekend. To visit your hometown. We had a party in the mine, and you and I went into the back—"

"I can guess," she interrupts.

"We talked," he says with a bubbly delight. "Do you remember talking to me?"

She glances down at her cooler, but there is no cooler now. And she looks up, finding the stranger still standing there, wearing different trousers and a different shirt, but otherwise unchanged, smiling at her with a possessive joy. That's when the terror grabs her, choking her voice as she admits, "I still don't remember—"

"Gregg March," he says. "I was a physics major."

Her mouth is open, but she can't make any sound.

"Of course you've got a lot of people to remember. Don't you, Lynda? A lot more names than most of us, that's for sure."

Again, she looks at her feet, hunting for the missing cooler. How can it vanish like this? And how can this Gregg fellow remain in front of her, wearing different clothes but the same obnoxious expression?

"You were drunk," he informs her. "And you started asking me a rather incredible set of questions."

Oh, God—!

"And I thought that's all you were," he says. "Drunk." Then he shrugs and laughs, admitting, "Which was fine with me. I was nineteen. You were beautiful. We slipped into the back of the mine, and you did something to me—"

"Gregg?" she mutters.

"Then afterward, you asked even more crazy questions."

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She says, "Gregg," before taking a deep breath. Then she assures him, "You're remembering another girl."

"Some other Lynda, you mean?"

She doesn't speak.

"I guess that's possible," he admits. "But she was your height, and lovely like you are, with the same dye-job hair . . . and I'd bet a queen's ransom that there can't be two women exactly like you. . . . "

A new cooler has appeared. Plastic, but smaller than the first cooler. The air feels suddenly drier, a cool north wind blowing around Happy Jack Hill. But she's wearing a summer sweater that keeps her arms warm. Glancing backward, she sees a red LeBaron in the parking lot. Most of her cars are red. That's one of those details that almost never changes.

"You do remember me," he says, refusing to vanish.

She sighs and picks up the latest cooler, then pries up the lid to glance at the egg salad sandwich that she remembers packing this morning. Her husband is the town's only policeman. He is a big, powerful man. He made love to her last night. She can remember his rough touch and his tender caresses and how he said her name over and over with an exhausted joy.

"Lynda," says Gregg.

She tells him, "That was so long ago. But sure, I remember you now. How have you been, Gregg?"

"Busy," he replies.

"I can believe it." Then she starts toward the office door, again asking, "Would you like to take the tour?"

He almost giggles. "Sure. Why not?"

The posted price is four dollars. She says, "You don't need to pay me," and winks at him with an easy fondness. An old black telephone is set on her little desk. She considers it for a moment, thinking about her policeman. But she thinks again, picking up the long flashlight that's always set somewhere near the back door, double-checking her keys, then making sure that she smiles when she says, "For old times' sake?"

Gregg looks like every man who knows that he's about to get lucky. He grins and almost dances his way over to the door, saying, "Perfect. That's what this is. Perfect!"

The air below ground is always fifty-six degrees and damp. The chalk pillars are always thick and gray, holding up a ceiling of fine-grained sandstone that carries the weight of Happy Jack Hill. The mine was closed long before Lynda was born. The differences from place to place are always tiny things: A lover's name etched into a flat chalk surface; a gray boulder dislodged by vandals; the precise layout of the new lights and the exhibits meant to entertain and educate the occasional tourist.

Three mannequins stand in the middle of the first round room. Each wears overalls and work boots, crude tools wired to their plastic hands or lying at their feet. "That pole is the axle to a Model T," Lynda explains. "The miners sharpened the axle, then used it like a chisel to drive holes into the soft chalk."

"Simple, and elegant," Gregg declares.

"They used black powder to dislodge fresh rock." She is aware of his hungry stares, but she keeps her eyes fixed on the mannequins, adding, "It was dirty, slow work. There were only three miners, normally. But they managed to carve nearly a mile worth of tunnels, and never once was there a cave-in."

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"Beautiful," he murmurs.

Now she glances at him, and smiles. "Do you remember?" she asks. "Where we were, I mean. When we 'talked.'"

He shakes his head, admitting, "I don't. Not exactly."

She says, "I do."

He takes a quick, deep breath.

She starts walking, and Gregg follows, listening as she admits, "Everything changes in my life, but this." She gestures at the chalk walls. "I've been married to every man and boy in the county, more times than I can count. I've lived in every house, and I can't count my kids. Everything is temporary for me, except for the mine and my job here."

"I can stop all that," Gregg offers.

She gives him a look. A shy smile.

"That's what I came to tell you," he says. "When we were kids, you asked if there was an explanation for what was happening. You didn't come out and admit it was happening to you. But I could tell. You dropped enough hints. You talked about a little girl going to sleep in one bed and waking in another. How her clothes would change without warning, how thunderstorms or a foot of snow could vanish in a blink of the eye. When she was very young, she naturally believed every person lived like that. Her parents dismissed her odd little comments. They thought she simply had a healthy imagination. That's all. But the little girl soon realized that she was the strange one. Unique, and remarkable. Her soul was skating from world to world. From life to life. And like any child, she learned to accept what to ordinary people would seem utterly incredible."

"That's why I won't drink anymore," Lynda admits cheerfully. "Beer makes me talk too much."

"I thought you were a crazy drunk. But not anymore." He walks beside her now, keeping a lover's distance. "I'm a physicist now. I've been involved in research. What you experience—the life you've always known—has been dubbed a side-slip reality condition."

"Is that what they call it?" she says, laughing.

Gregg nods soberly, then speaks in a breathless rush. "The brain is a quantum computer, of a special sort. It navigates through an infinite assortment of potential worlds, and what we call consciousness—our soul—is an adaptation. An artificial construct, really." He sounds like any scientist, happily explaining the impossible with senseless words. "Most of us exist along the simplest of lines. Cause and effect are easy to see. But sometimes, on rare occasions, a young soul divides into two identical souls. It's a trick of quantum mechanics, and I'd need about a month to show you the calculations—"

"Let's not then," she says jovially.

"But the second soul can't coexist with its mate for long. That's my point. It's an unstable situation, so the mirror soul starts to wander, finding similar minds where it can live for a moment, or a day. Which is what happened to you, Lynda. I'm guessing, but it probably started clear back in the womb."

The overhead lights come to an end. She turns on the long flashlight, throwing the beam into the blackness at the back of the mine. "Did you discover this condition of mine?"

"No. Colleagues did the groundbreaking work." But Gregg is quick to add, "I'm part of the team that built a machine that mimics your condition."

Quietly, she says, "Did you?"

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"Actually, we can do everything you can, but better."

"Oh?"

His elbow brushes against hers. "When we were outdoors. Remember? We were jumping from earth to earth."

"I'm usually alone when things change."

"It's less disruptive that way, I'd think."

"Usually," she says.

"This time," says Gregg, "the side-slip machine was jumping you. And me. It was putting us on earths where both of us would naturally find ourselves together. That's how it was getting a good solid hold on the both of us."

"How does the machine work?" she whispers.

"Later," he promises. "I'll explain it all later."

She glances at the man, and then looks down at her feet. The chalk floor is covered with a fine gray powder that hasn't been disturbed for months, if not years. The only light comes from the yellow plastic flashlight that she carries in her right hand. Passing between two massive pillars, she steers left. The next round room is the last room. They are as far beneath Happy Jack Hill as a person can be.

"Lynda," he says quietly. Hopefully.

She stops and turns, looking at Gregg's face in the reflected glare of the flashlight.

"You can cure me," she says.

"Yes."

"Really?"

He says, "Yes," emphatically. His tongue comes out long enough to moisten his lips. Then he explains, "What you're doing—how you've always lived—is to coexist with another Lynda soul. The two of you make a single entity, if only for a little while. That's why you know enough to live the other Lynda's life, and that's why she doesn't even realize that an intruder is inside her head."

"What will you do?" she asks quietly.

"First, you'll select a world. A life. Any life you've ever lived, or something new. Either way, I can find that life for you and merge your soul with that other Lynda. And I can make it a permanent marriage. Really, it is an astonishingly easy trick, if you know what you're doing."

She doesn't speak.

The silence makes Gregg nervous. He coughs softly, and then admits, "The hard part was finding you, Lynda. Searching through trillions upon trillions of possible earths, looking for that unique, precious soul. The girl I remembered from my youth."

"Thank you," she says. Then she straightens, and smiles, and she hands the flashlight to him, saying, "I mean it. Let me thank you."

Gregg looks like a nervous little boy suddenly. "What. . . ?" he sputters.

"Just shine the light on me," she tells him. Then she steps toward the back wall, noticing the names Judy and Bill etched into the chalk, tucked like lovers inside the same crudely rendered heart. She knows which Bill and which Judy this is. Sparks is a small town. Yet inside that smallness, she has been married to Bill more times than she can count, and she has shared hundreds, if not thousands of children with that delightful man.

The light dips, for an instant.

"Watch me," she urges.

Gregg lifts the beam again, and waits.

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She turns her back to him, hands lifting, unbuttoning the blouse as her quiet, secure voice tells him, "I used to think it was the name of this place."

"What's that?"

"Sparks," she says. "For me, my life is like a spark jumping. You know how you put your hand close to a charge, but you don't know when the circuit will close? Then *crack,* the spark happens." She laughs, telling him, "When I was a child, I thought everyone in Sparks lived this way."

"I can imagine," says Gregg.

Her bra has a front clasp. She unfastens it and turns, letting the beam play across her bare breasts.

"What do you think, Gregg?"

He says, "Nice."

"The cold air," she says. "Look at my poor nipples."

He makes a low, incoherent sound.

"Come here," she tells him.

The man steps forward, and breathes in gulps, and with his free hand, he wipes at his eyes.

"For old times' sake," she whispers.

"Okay."

"Stand here. Against the wall."

He couldn't be more compliant, and when she kneels in front of him, a low moan leaks out of him.

Lynda unfastens the brass button on his trousers, and then she opens the zipper. His trousers fall to his ankles. She reaches up again. One hand grips the elastic band of his underwear, while the other calmly takes the flashlight from his shaking hand. She turns the flashlight as she lowers it, using a warm and longing voice when she tells him, "You don't know how much I want this. To be cured."

The physicist says, "Shit," under his breath.

She shines the beam into his eyes, just for an instant. Then she extinguishes the light and yanks the underwear to his knees, and she says, "Hold still. I have to get comfortable."

"Okay," he says.

Lynda rises to her feet and backs away as quietly as possible. The blackness is absolute. She knows the layout of the room well enough to find her way out into the next room, and the room after that. By then, Gregg is saying her name with an increasingly anxious tone. "Where are you, Lynda?" For being smart, he shows a stubborn disregard for what has become obvious. Then finally, he attempts to move, and she hears the dusty thud as he trips over a lump of dirty chalk.

Lynda turns on the flashlight, and runs.

When she sees the ceiling lights ahead, she flings the flashlight into a dead-end tunnel. Then she runs even faster, refastening her bra and blouse, steering through the maze of rooms and pillars, knowing exactly where the exit will be.

She closes and locks the heavy plywood door, then staggers into her office, locking the back door and flipping the breakers, killing the big lights strung along the ceiling. But the man will eventually find his way out. Or someone, maybe one of his science friends, will come and find him. How does their machinery work? She wishes she knew more, but it's too late for questions. She is angry enough to cry, running outside and up a narrow woodchip path. The parking lot is concrete. The red car is a Mustang. She recognizes

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its key on a chain jammed with important keys, and she unlocks the car and climbs in and starts it up, pulling out onto the highway and turning south, letting the powerful engine and her own wild desperation carry her along.

How much money does she have?

She starts to look, and then she remembers that it doesn't matter. Give it time, and the money in your pocket always changes.

How far does she have to go to be safe again?

She doesn't have any clue. Not one. But she decides that if she can steer clear of her old life and haunts, then maybe she can hide forever inside the endless tangle of similar worlds.

Lynda turns on the car radio, finding the local country station. With lyrics wrapped around soft guitars, a young woman speaks about how easy it is to change one's life. To start over. To do everything better.

But Lynda barely hears the encouragement, clinging to the steering wheel and pushing the big V-8 engine as hard as she dares, doing better than ninety down the middle of that winding and beautiful and treacherously narrow highway. ❍

On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

Continued from page 12

I can't think of another site with a list this comprehensive. Mark has really just started to post reviews of new short fiction but his is a welcome new voice in an area where there is nowhere near enough diversity. Judging by what he has written thus far, his approval is well worth having and his scorn is to be feared.

exit

It is an indisputable fact that one is never caught up for long these days. The speedy Pentium III processor in my not-so-new-anymore computer has already been superseded by the speedier Pentium IV chip. Windows 98 is looking a little dusty with the advent of Windows ME and Windows 2000. And while my broadband is pretty broad, thank you, I read of folks who connect at 1 or 1.5 *mbs* and am envious.

But then I think of the folks who can't afford broadband or the latest hardware or any damn hardware at all. The only computer that lots of people have access to is the one at their local library. The Digital Divide is real and it is a problem and it is going to get much, much worse. Those of us who are roaring down the information superhighway at 600 kbs need to deal with the implications of leaving people behind.

It occurs to me that worrying about a digitally divided future ought to be the special responsibility of us science fiction folk. After all, that's what we're supposed to be good at. ❍

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THE WORLD WITHOUT

Steven Utley

Steven Utley's books include the novels, *Lone Star Universe* and *Ghost Seas*, and two volumes of verse, *This Impatient Ape* and *Career Moves of the Gods*. He is currently at work on *Silurian Tales* —a collection of his most recent short pieces.

Cutsinger's roommate lay upon his bed next to the curtained window, addressing himself to the mocha-colored ceiling. Cutsinger could not follow and did not want to follow the discourse, which was a variation on the day-after-visiting-day lament Cutsinger had been hearing ever since this particular roommate had been installed. It took the form of a mumbled, rambling editorial, by turns self-pitying and wrathful, about wretchedly ungrateful offspring and the certainty of their going straight to Hell, and Cutsinger understood from unhappy experience that this exercise would continue at least until dinnertime and possibly beyond. Sitting on his own side of the room with his back turned, with his knobby, pajama-clad knees clutched in his liver-spotted hands, he thought, I've already died and gone to Hell.

"Enough," he growled, "enough! Shut up!" He did not look around at his roommate, but his vehemence startled the other man into silence. Cutsinger wiped away a fleck of spittle with the back of his hand and waited, counting the seconds, knowing that it was hopeless, useless, pointless. Presently, his roommate began to speak again of treacherous children and the unerring vengeance of God.

"Listen to me," Cutsinger said. He did not raise his voice now; he spoke bitterly but quietly. "I don't give a goddamn about your children or if they never come to see you. If I was one of your children, I wouldn't come to see you either. All you ever do is whine and drool on yourself. They put you in this place because you belong here. I don't. I'm not supposed to be here. I just found myself here all of a sudden. Listen to me, let me tell you what happened," and he paused and listened for a moment to his roommate's un-

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ceasing, unchanging recitation of complaint and condemnation. "In quantum physics, we use a mathematical expression called the wave function to describe a particle or a system of particles and the way it changes in time. Are you listening to me? Did you get that? Particles? Systems of particles? Particles exist on the micro level, the subatomic level. You and I are systems of particles. We exist on the macro level. Am I making myself clear?"

The roommate went on with his own monologue. Cutsinger made a disgusted noise and began the long struggle to get to his feet. He was halfway out of the chair, gripping its arms and tremblingly supporting the weight of his upper body, when his field of vision contracted suddenly and turned gray around the edges. The world seemed to rise and tilt beneath his feet. He sat down hard and closed his eyes tightly and kept them closed until his head stopped spinning. He clutched his thin thighs and bowed his head and waited for his breathing to slow, his heart to quit racing. Dammit, he thought. I don't deserve this. The spells were coming more frequently all the time. He was afraid of what they might signify and afraid to find out what they signified. He had told no one about them.

He rested for several minutes while his roommate muttered and whined. Then, summoning his strength anew, Cutsinger began slowly and carefully to raise himself again. This time, he got to his feet, opened the door, and made his shuffling escape.

Cutsinger's agoraphobia had grown worse over the years. The venetian blinds in his room were never opened, nor the thick, heavy curtains. Days and nights were punctuated by meals, medication, bowel movements, lights out. The facility that was now his home occupied an H-shaped building with long glass windows at each point of the H; whenever circumstances conspired to have him approach, he did so with one hand raised before his face to block the sight of the world without. Occasionally he caught an inadvertent glimpse of it and was reminded that the seasons were color-coded, white winter, green spring, brown and red autumn, and that the building itself, built of brick and cinder block, was painted an unhappy yellow. His memories of the rest of that world, however, had long since become monochromatic and blurry.

Apart from the agoraphobia, he was desiccated and brittle, and various things variously hurt or did not function properly. But his mind seemed to him to be clear—certainly it was clearer than his roommate's, and he imagined that it was probably clearer than anyone else's in the entire facility. He flattered himself that he could still distinguish his moments of clarity, of acuity even, from his bad moments, and that he could still converse coherently and cogently whenever there was anyone willing to listen and make the effort to understand. But the doctors and attendants only humored him, and his fellow inmates were senile, a sad and saddening lot, individually either withdrawn and silent or else tending, with little or no prompting, to babble the most deranged or simply banal of religious sentiments. Most human interaction is talk; all the rest is incidental—so Cutsinger had come to believe. One spent one's life, up to a point, eating, fornicating, raising children, moving about, and, if one was lucky, thinking thoughts, so that one would have things to talk about when eating had become a chore, fornication an impossibility, and all the obligations pertaining to children were discharged. And in his own case, he had a gigantic need to tell someone about what had happened to him, what had become of him. Cutsinger had his own

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idea of what visiting day ought to be. He imagined that it would be diverting to be visited by some eager, intelligent, respectful person who wanted him to talk about himself. Perhaps this person would have seen him in an ancient documentary, or read about him in somebody's new book—Cutsinger assumed that somebody, somewhere, still wrote the occasional book. Perhaps this eager, intelligent, respectful visitor might even have read one or another of Cutsinger's own books. Although all of these were long out of print and he himself no longer possessed copies of any of them, he knew that he had indeed authored a number of books, both technical and popular, and that at least a couple of the latter type, *Events Leading to the Infinite Regress* and *The Great Wave-Function Collapse of '29,* had been best-sellers. But no such eager, intelligent, respectful person ever came to visit him. In fact, no one of any description ever visited him.

The main entrance in his wing opened into a room designated as The Chapel and used as a general reception area. Here were stuffed chairs, sofas, an organ, and an antiquated two-D color television set. Christmas was one week away, The Chapel accordingly had been decorated, sparsely and cheaply, with tinsel and paper Santas, angels, and stockings, and Cutsinger both hated the occasion and avoided the room on general principle. Now he had the ill luck to be standing in the corridor, outside his own door, when a white-uniformed press gang of attendants passed, herding a dozen or more of his fellow inmates; he found himself swept with them along the entire length of the corridor, into The Chapel. The curtains there had been closed, fortuitously preventing his seeing outside, but in one corner of the room, seven members of the local high-school band—six teenaged boys of assorted sizes, shapes, and complexions, and a tallish, pretty girl wearing plastic reindeer antlers upon her head—were arranging sheet music on metal stands. The girl, insufferably perky, announced that they would begin their program with "Come, All Ye Faithful." It was immediately clear to Cutsinger that while she and her companions meant well, they played badly, and he decided that he and his fellow inmates had been brought here in the capacity of human sacrifices, lest adolescent egos be bruised.

He made to rise; an attendant standing nearby unfolded his arms and cocked a questioning eyebrow, but Cutsinger said, just loudly enough to be heard above the racket, "Gotta use the can." The attendant nodded and refolded his arms, and Cutsinger pushed himself to his feet—too fast, because he suffered another attack of dizziness. It lasted only a second or two, and as he looked about, dazedly at first, then self-consciously, he saw that the attendants and his fellow inmates were watching the trombonists with varying degrees of interest. He essayed a step, then another, then another, and in this gradual manner moved past the attendant and back into the corridor. Behind him, "Come, All Ye Faithful" expired with a final strangled cry, and someone clapped desultorily.

"Thank you, we're glad you liked that," he heard the antlered girl say brightly. "The next number we're going to do is 'It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.'"

Cutsinger hastened on and decided to seek refuge in the men's restroom located halfway down the corridor. He closed the door behind himself and discovered that he was still unable not to hear the trombones. He promptly emerged and moved on, desperate to reach his room. Even his roommate's dreary babble was not as bad, he reflected, as a barrage of Christmas music.

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At last he was there. The door was slightly ajar. As he laid his hand on the doorknob, his head spun and his ears rang again, deafeningly, and walls, floor, and ceiling whirled around him. He felt nauseous, and his head wobbled on his shoulders. "Oh God," he said, and collapsed.

He lay quietly on the table while the physician on call dressed the large, tender bump in the middle of his forehead. When she stepped away from him, he carefully touched it and murmured, "Big as a plum."

"It's going to be the color of one, too," said the doctor. Her name was Judith Kraft; she was small and finely made, fortyish, with lustrous dark eyes—quite attractive, he had often thought, though he was long past all but the memory of sexual inclinations, let alone activity.

"I was trying to escape. From the Seven Trombonists of the Apocalypse."

That elicited a smile as she stood looking at his medical records on her computer screen. "Well, their hearts're in the right place, you've got to give them that. You're lucky bouncing your noggin off linoleum didn't break anything. But just to be on the safe side—"

"Is it serious enough for me to have to go into the hospital?"

"Hardly. But I am going to send you over to the clinic to have your skull X-rayed."

His heart sank, and he could not repress a shiver. He dreaded the prospect of being out of the building.

She picked up one of her instruments and peered into each of his ears. Up close, she was subtly, pleasantly fragrant. He momentarily felt the cool, tender touch of a fingertip on his temple. "What's the last thing you remember before you passed out?"

"Being dizzy."

"Like a reeling sensation?"

"Yes. And I wanted to throw up. My ears were ringing."

"Mm. How long have you been having these episodes?

"I haven't been having them," he said quickly, so quickly that he knew she could not believe him. He heaved a sigh. "I mean, I didn't have them until just lately. This month. Maybe part of last, too. No, just this month."

"Whenever it started, you ought to have told us about it right away."

He turned his head so that he would not have to meet her eyes, but he moved his hand to indicate that he accepted the reproach. "What is it? Have I had a stroke?"

"Nothing nearly as serious as that. Stroke isn't in your profile."

"I'm not ready to die."

"No, you're not, and we're not ready to let you, either." She put down the instrument and favored him with what was patently intended to be a reassuring smile. "As far as I can tell, all you have is an ear infection. It's causing a disturbance in one of the little semi-circular canals of your inner ear, which louses up your sense of balance. So you have a sudden attack of violent dizziness, ringing in the ear, vomiting. I'm going to put you on some antibiotics to take care of the infection. It's the bonk on the head that really concerns me."

"Do I have to go to the clinic?"

"Well, they can't roll that great big X-ray machine all the way over here."

"I can't go outside."

"It's just a short hop from here to there, and—"

"*I can't go outside.*"

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"Now, you won't be outside, you'll be safe inside the ambulance. You'll be just fine. I promise."

A great tear welled up on each side of his nose. He smeared them away with a thumb and forefinger and said, "This shouldn't be happening to me. This isn't my life."

He saw that she had not heard him. She was saying something about increasing one of his regular medications from ten to twenty milligrams. He extended his hand and laid it upon her bare forearm; obviously startled and slightly annoyed, she gently but firmly pulled away.

"I really don't belong in this place, Doctor. Nobody here has any idea who I am. Who I was. The most famous man in my field at one time."

She gave him a look of polite inquiry. "What field was that, Mister Cutsinger?"

"Doctor. I have a pee-aitch-dee. Physics."

She studied the computer screen. "Oh, yes, here it is. I see."

"No, you don't. I was tops in kew-em. Quantum mechanics. I became the leading expert on time travel."

The expression of polite inquiry became tinged with amusement and tolerance or with some such commingling of attitudes—he was not sure what they were, he knew only that he did not care for the look on her face, and he glared up at her.

"Time travel. Don't they teach people anything in school any more?"

"I remember hearing something about that, yes. Expeditions into the prehistoric past. That was quite a long time ago," and she smiled pleasantly at her own little joke.

"Do you understand," he said, "the concept of multiple realities? Do you remember the poem about the road not taken?"

"Don't you mean the road less traveled?"

"Whichever the hell road it was." He knew what he wanted to say to her, what he must tell her. He used to talk and write about these things so that anybody, idiots, politicians, could grasp the essentials. It all came back to him, the words were suddenly *there* for him as they once had been, all those years, all that time ago, but he was afraid that they would not wait long for him now unless he hurried, and so he began to speak urgently and breathlessly.

"In quantum physics, a particle or a system of particles and the way it changes in time are described by a mathematical fiction, an expression known as the wave function. Whenever a system is measured, the wave function gives the probabilities that certain variables will acquire certain values. The variables are such things as position, velocity, momentum, energy, spin, and when I say they acquire values I mean they can be measured. But by measuring the wave function, you reduce it to definite values, we say it collapses from an indefinite to a definite state. This leads to paradoxes unless you're willing to assume—"

He could see that she was beginning to tune him out. He snapped, "I trust I'm not boring you."

"I'm sorry, I just have no idea what you're talking about."

He made an impatient gesture. "Then I'll cut to the chase. When wave functions collapse for *whatever* reason, reality branches. Continually. Countless times each second. The universe splits into copies, the copies split into copies. On and on, forever. For every possible outcome of every possible quantum interaction, a universe must exist to accommodate the difference,

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no matter how slight that difference may be. So there is an infinite number of physically disconnected and yet coexistent universes, all in more or less different states. Each copy is brought into being with its own space and time, its own material objects, everything. Its own human beings. You and me. We split just like everything else."

Doctor Kraft folded her arms; her expression told Cutsinger exactly what she was thinking. She was thinking, Now I've heard everything. She said, "I imagine I'd remember an experience like splitting."

"No. You don't notice the splitting because your sensory perception and memory don't operate at the quantum level. Only at the macroscopic level. Each copy of you is aware only of its own self and the universe it inhabits. Now, when you time-travel into the past, you don't literally travel backward in time. That's impossible. Instead you travel from one universe into another. From a present-day Earth to an Earth where conditions are as they were in prehistoric times. And then, of course, to get home, you have to travel from universe to universe again. And there—there's where everything went wrong. I—I didn't make it back."

Her eyebrows rose. After a moment, she said, "Obviously you did make it back. You're here, aren't you?"

"I'm not supposed to be here. This isn't the universe I was supposed to come back to. This isn't my world, and this isn't my life. This isn't how things were supposed to work out for me—shuffling around in slippers and a cheap robe, surrounded by drooling doddering crazy people—*this isn't my life*. My own life is in some other universe, on some other Earth, where I'm not in this awful place, forgotten, rotting away. Where I didn't lose everything somehow, my family and my friends, all my money. Where I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing, living the way I ought to be living. Working on my memoirs, contemplating a life and a career full of accomplishments and honors."

He saw Doctor Kraft look up sharply as two men entered the room. One of them spoke her name, and she said to Cutsinger, "Here's Harry now to take you to the ambulance."

Harry, blond and immense in white, looked down at him and smiled. "Let's get you onto the gurney—easy does it."

"I can't do this," Cutsinger whimpered, "please"

"You're going to be fine," said the doctor. "It's just a short hop over to the clinic. They'll back the ambulance right up to the door and take you in, so you'll hardly be out in the open for more than five whole seconds, will he, Harry?"

"Three seconds tops," said Harry, "and you can keep your eyes closed the whole time."

Cutsinger suffered himself to be lifted off the examining table and onto the gurney, and then Harry and his companion maneuvered it out of the room. Their progress along the corridor was accompanied by the soft constant thrum of wheels on linoleum, the soft rhythmic padding of the white-clad men's feet, the soft intermittent murmuring of Cutsinger's fellow inmates as he passed their half-open doors. Cutsinger raised his head slightly and saw the corridor stretching before him to infinity. As the gurney approached it, infinity resolved itself into long glass windows, and he held his hand before his face to shut out the sight. O

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The brave adventurers who survived "Stealing Alabama"
(*Asimov's*, January 2001), and persevered through
"The Days Between" (*Asimov's*, March 2001),
must now face the dangers inherent in . . .

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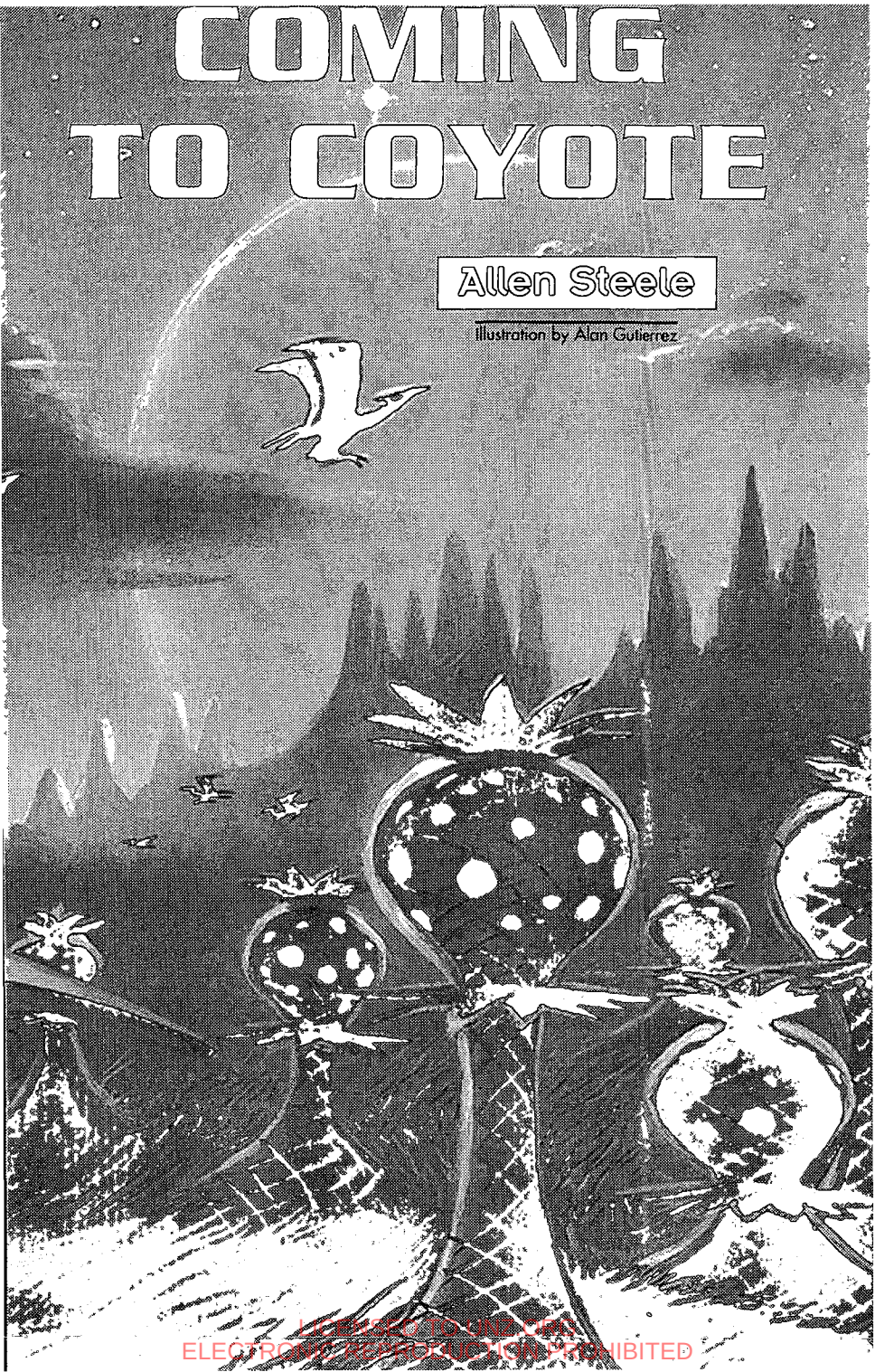
COMING TO COYOTE

Allen Steele

Illustration by Alan Gutierrez



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URSS *Alabama* 8.26.2300 (12.6.2296 rel.) 0330 GMT

Not long after Robert Lee was picked to be commanding officer of the *Alabama,* the Federal Space Agency sent him and eleven members of his flight crew to Arizona for survival training. At the end of the two-week seminar, the team was airlifted into the Sonora Desert northeast of the Mexican border, where they parachuted into the barren country with little more than their survival knives and a half-liter bottle of water for each person. No rations, no communications gear, no compass. Until they reached the rendezvous point thirty miles away, they were expected to live off the land as best they could.

As their leader, Lee was responsible for the well-being of the eleven men and women under his command, a task made more difficult by the fact that Tom Shapiro twisted his right knee upon landing. Dr. Rawlings—the original Chief Physician, who would later wash out of training—bandaged Tom's knee with a torn strip of parachute nylon and Jud Tinsley cut a tree branch for him to use as a walking stick, but their trek across the desert was nonetheless reduced from an anticipated ten miles a day to less than seven. So there was little opportunity for Lee to reflect upon the harsh majesty of the Sonora, for every waking moment was focused upon the task of survival: finding their bearings, foraging for food and water, tending to minor injuries, keeping morale high. The shark-toothed mountains surrounding them became simply a backdrop for their ordeal, and he had no time to admire the towering organ-pipe cactus as anything more than a meager source of water.

On their second night in the desert, the team curled up in the makeshift sleeping bags they had fashioned from their parachutes, hungry after having had nothing more than a few strips of undercooked lizard and some juniper berries for dinner, their sunburned skin chilled by the cold wind that moaned across the barrens after the sun went down. Exhausted beyond belief, his legs aching and his feet beginning to blister, Lee wrapped himself within his parachute, pulling it up around his head to prevent scorpions from climbing into bed with him. The flickering glow of the dying campfire was the last thing he saw before he closed his eyes; he couldn't bring himself to look up at the stars, for fear that he might spot the Ursa Major constellation. Although he hadn't expressed his thoughts to anyone, Lee secretly harbored doubts about his ability to lead an expedition to 47 Ursae Majoris. Indeed, he was beginning to seriously consider tendering his resignation once he returned to Houston, and thereby leaving the Starflight Project.

He didn't know how long he slept, yet sometime in the middle of the night he abruptly awoke with the preternatural feeling that he was being watched. He couldn't see or hear it, yet nonetheless he knew that a presence was nearby.

Swaddled within his parachute, his hands tucked within his armpits for warmth, Lee remained still, searching with his ears for the slightest movement. For a long time he couldn't hear anything save for the wind, and he was almost ready to believe that it had only been a dream when pebbles softly clattered as if a weight had settled upon them, and it was then that he knew for certain that he was no longer alone.

Heart hammering within his chest, Lee fought to control his breathing; he couldn't see anything through the parachute, and he was acutely aware of just how vulnerable he was. Once again, he heard small stones make a hollow sound as they shifted together, yet this time it was much closer. Something had entered the campsite, and it was very close to him.

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Lee felt something gently prod his shoulder. He held his breath as paws padded only a few inches from his face; he smelled the rank odor of animal fur, and there was a faint snuffle as the intruder caught his scent. Whatever it was, it was now standing directly above him. Studying him.

He couldn't hold his breath any longer. He hesitated, then snapped, "Get outta here . . . shoo!"

There was a startled *whuff!* then the animal scampered away. Lee waited a few seconds, then whipped aside the parachute and sat up to gaze around the campsite. The moon had risen and now hung directly overhead, casting a silver-white aura across the forms huddled around him; no one else had been disturbed. Yet the intruder had disappeared.

Lee remained awake the rest of the night, gazing up at the stars. He didn't consider himself to be a religious person, yet he knew that he had just experienced a moment of spiritual awakening. When the sun rose over the mountains, he was ready to take his people out of the desert; never again would he be uncertain about his leadership ability. By the time they arrived at the rendezvous point, all thoughts of resignation had been forgotten.

Yet he told no one about what had happened, then or later. His encounter with the coyote was meant for him, and him alone.

And now it's 232 years later, and for some reason this memory comes back to him as he watches Kuniko Okada carefully remove plastic surgical tubes from his arms. Gelatinous blue fluid trickles down his naked body, staining the towel wrapped around his waist; Lee stares blankly at the biostasis cell from which he has just emerged, his mind numb from his long and dreamless sleep.

Dr. Okada's hands tremble as she withdraws another tube from his forearm. Although she was the first to awaken, she hasn't quite shaken off the aftereffects of the somatic drugs. Lee finds himself staring at a dimple in the soft flesh on top of her skull; the last time he saw Kuniko, her raven hair had fallen to the base of her neck, yet like everyone else aboard—himself included—she had shaved her head shortly before entering biostasis. Everyone aboard *Alabama* was bald now; he'd better get used to it.

On the other side of the compartment, Tom Shapiro sips water from a foam cup, his elbows resting on his knees. The First Officer looks up at him, gives Lee a tired smile. "Think it was going to be this bad?"

Lee slowly shakes his head. He knows he should be grateful to be feeling anything at all. Until now, the record for human hibernation had been eighteen months, during tests conducted at the Marshall Space Flight Center. They proved that long-term biostasis was theoretically possible, yet there was no way anyone could be sure that the *Alabama*'s crew would remain safely in coma-like conditions for over two and a quarter centuries. Lee looks up at Kuniko. "How . . . did the others pull through?"

"Think so. Haven't checked everyone yet, but . . ." Okada pulls out the last tube, then gently tapes a square of surgical gauze across the wound in his arm. "Something you should know, Captain. One of the cells was empty when I woke up. Someone was revived before me."

"Before you?" Lee doesn't quite understand. "Run that by me again. Weren't you supposed to. . . ?"

"This one, skipper." Shapiro nods toward the coffin-like cell closest to him; like the others on the hibernation deck, it's been lowered from its niche in the bulkhead. "It's dry. Nobody's been here for awhile."

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Gently massaging his sore arm, Lee slowly rises to his feet. His legs are like stiff rubber, yet he impatiently shakes off Okada's hand as he shuffles across the deck to inspect the cell. Its fiberglass lid is shut, yet as he gazes through its inspection window he can see that it's empty, its suspension fluid drained. The status panel is blank, so there's no easy way of determining who had once been inside, yet as Tom said, it hasn't been occupied for a very long time.

"Dana's gone below." Shapiro staggers to his feet, stumbles over to a storage locker; he pulls out a headset, fits it around his ears. "I'll have her check it out."

"Do that, please." The fourteen biostasis cells in Deck C2A were occupied by *Alabama*'s command team; once the AI revived Dr. Okada, she would have then resuscitated Dana Monroe, the Chief Engineer, in order for her to inspect the ship's major operating systems. Lee himself and Tom were next in line, followed shortly by Jud Tinsley, his Executive Officer, and Sharon Ullman, the Senior Navigator. Lee gazes around the compartment. Tinsley sits up in his cell, hands clasped around his knees as he takes his first breaths of fresh air; Sharon is still immersed in suspension gel, oxygen mask in place around her face. The other cells remain in vertical position, their occupants sleeping for just a little while longer. Kuniko, Dana, Tom, Jud, Sharon, himself . . . so who else was there?

"Gillis," Okada says quietly. "Now I remember. He's in that cell."

"Yeah, sure. Les." Lee tries to shake off the cobwebs. Leslie Gillis, the Chief Communications Officer . . . but why would the AI have revived him before Kuniko? He's about to ask this question when Shapiro looks up at him.

"Skipper? Dana reports that the ship's in good condition and we're on course, but . . ." He listens to the voice in his headset. "Something's happened."

"Is there a problem?" Lee becomes a little more alert.

"Not a problem . . . or at least it doesn't seem that way. She . . ." Shapiro holds up a finger as he listens. "She's found something in the ring corridor, and we ought to take a look at it."

"Let me talk to her." Shapiro pulls off the headset and hands it to him; Lee holds the headset to his ear. "What have you found, Chief?"

"Hard to explain, sir." Monroe's voice is tinny. "Maybe you should see for yourself. It's in the ring, just before you get to the hub hatch. I don't know how or why, but . . ."

"Chief, I've already got one mystery. I don't need another. What've you found?"

"The walls, sir. Someone's painted the walls."

Dana Monroe touches the headset lobe, lets out her breath as she rests against the console of the main engineering station. Although *Alabama* has decelerated to a little less than one-quarter gee, her muscles are unaccustomed to any sort of exercise. It's difficult for her to remain standing for very long; indeed, climbing down the hub access shaft to the command center took a supreme effort. She feels a pang of regret for having urged the captain to leave the hibernation module before he's ready, but it can't be helped; something strange happened during the ship's long voyage, and it's her duty to inform the commanding officer.

Yet that's not her job just now. Her primary responsibility is ascertaining that *Alabama*'s major systems are nominal and that the ship hasn't suffered any significant damage. Settling into her accustomed seat, Dana taps

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instructions into the keyboard, studies flatscreen readouts. So far as she can tell, everything is as it should be . . . in fact, even a little better than she expected. Fuel reserves at 17.3 percent, almost three percent higher than anticipated; the ramscoop must have located more molecular hydrogen than had been theoretically projected. Main engine automatically shut down three months ago; the fusion reactor is now in medium-power mode, operating at the levels sufficient to maintain electricity for ship's internal systems. Minimal hull erosion; the buffer field had apparently protected the ship from interstellar dust, and there's no sign of leakage from any of the payload modules. Magnetic sail successfully deployed shortly after engine shutdown; it's now acting as a enormous drag-chute, using 47 Ursae Majoris's solar wind to gradually decelerate the ship from its .2c cruise velocity. Major life-support systems . . .

"Whoa," she murmurs. "What's this?" Dana enlarges a portion of the screen, then types in another query to double-check her findings. No, it's not a mistake: potable water reserves down 20.4 percent, oxygen/nitrogen by 21.9.

She whispers an obscenity. When she saw the walls in the ring corridor, she suspected the worst. Someone was up and around during *Alabama*'s outbound leg; judging from the amount of air and water he or she had consumed, they managed to survive for quite a long time.

A stowaway? Not unless he was suicidal. Still alive? Impossible; no one who hadn't been in biostasis would have lasted so long. Yet she hasn't found a body, and this is a big ship; there's dozens of places where someone could curl up and die. . . .

A chill runs down her back. This isn't something she wants to explore just now; once the rest of the command team is awake, she'll tell them what she's discovered. One thing at a time; just be glad you're alive. Dana observes her reflection in the nearest flatscreen. Not bad for a 268-year-old bald lady. . . .

She rubs her eyelids, yawns. God, why should she feel so sluggish? It's not as if she hasn't slept enough lately. And it's probably the last time she'll have the command center all to herself; once everyone else has been revived, over a hundred people will be elbowing one another for room.

Groaning with effort, Dana pushes herself out of her chair. Clutching the ceiling rails, she moves across the deck to the navigator's station. She reaches down to pull aside the plastic cover, then stops herself. In the dim half-light cast by ceiling fluorescents, she notices that the translucent sheet is spotted with filmy brown splotches. Curious, she gently scratches at a spot; it comes up easily, staining the tip of her finger.

Fungus. But the ship was decontaminated before it left Earth. So how could. . . ?

Later. Like the captain said: one mystery at a time, please. Dana uncovers the nav console and lets the sheet fall to the floor, then searches the panels until she locates the porthole shutter controls. She presses the buttons, watches as the shutters outside the rectangular windows slowly move upward. Raw sunlight lances through the thick glass; she winces against the glare, reflexively raising a hand to her eyes. Then the windows polarize and now, past the long shadow cast by the ramscoop, she sees a brilliant white orb.

47 Ursae Majoris. Dana lowers her hand. Tears well at the corners of her eyes.

"Hello, sweetheart," she whispers through the tightness in her throat. "You've got company."

* * *

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Snow-capped mountains above vast plains of high grass, where six-legged felines roam between oddly twisted trees. Multicolored birds soar through a purple sky, silhouetted against an enormous ringed planet looming above the horizon. In the far distance, ships move across a sapphire ocean, their sails billowed by a warm breeze. A caravan of wheeled carts drawn by shaggy ox-like creatures trundles down a road, pennants fluttering in the winds. Upon the crest of a low hill, a handsome young man dressed in medieval regalia gazes down upon this panorama; behind him stand a multitude of characters: warriors, noblemen, merchants, a beautiful woman, a small child.

Nearly sixty feet long, the mural wraps itself almost entirely around the inside wall of the ring corridor, its concave surface lending the painting a three-dimensional effect. The illusion isn't accidental; the artist placed the closer objects near the top and bottom of the wall and put the more distant objects toward the center. His attention to detail was extraordinary; every single feather on the birds has been individually colored, and even the mountains have distinct ridges and gullies.

Fascinated, Lee gazes upon the mural for a long time. "Les had a lot of time on his hands," he says at last, very quietly.

"Thirty-two years." Shapiro studies the readout on his pad; he's used it to access the ship's log. "He was revived on October 3, 2070, and died on February 25, 2102." He shakes his head. "He must have been out of his mind at the end."

Lee steps a little closer to the mural, gently touches it with his finger. Watercolor. Doubtless from the small supply of art materials in cargo. "Does it say why he was revived?"

Shapiro shakes his head. "Only that it was by accident. Ditto for cause of death . . . the AI reports that his body was found at the bottom of the hub shaft. He was jettisoned into space shortly afterward. Everything else is pretty much routine . . . maintenance reports, navigational updates, that sort of thing. Very little about Gillis himself. It's almost as if he wasn't here."

The captain slowly walks to where the mural ends, his hands thrust in the pockets of his robe. The painting was left unfinished: only pencil outlines, without any coloration. This was probably where Gillis was working when he died. If Les was in his early thirties when he came out of biostasis and he managed to survive alone aboard the *Alabama* for the next thirty-two years—a fact even more mind-boggling than the artwork he had created—then he would have been in his sixties when he died. Back home, this would be considered middle-age, but out here on his own, with no chance of cellular rejuvenation . . . "Poor bastard probably fell off the shaft ladder, broke his neck."

"You're probably right." The first officer shuts the pad. "If we look around, maybe we can find a diary or a journal. That's what I would have done, if I were him."

Lee nods; he's still examining the mural. With no sunlight to fade the paint and the ship's internal temperature lowered to fifty degrees, it remained perfectly preserved for nearly two hundred years. Yet he can only wonder what it means. What is this place, and who are all these people? "Look around. There may be something that explains this. But that's not what concerns me just now."

"Like, how he managed to stay alive so long?" Tom's face is grave. "I was just thinking about that."

"Uh-huh. Gillis had to eat, and there was no food aboard except the expedition rations. If he got to them . . ."

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"I know. We could be in trouble." Shapiro turns to head back down the corridor. "I'll check the cargo modules, see how much of a dent he put in the stores."

"Do that, please. Let me know what you find." Upon afterthought, Lee grasps Shapiro's shoulder. "And Tom . . . keep it quiet, at least for the time being. No sense in alarming anyone unless . . . I mean, until we have to."

Shapiro nods. Down in Deck C2A, Dr. Okada is bringing up the remaining members of the command team; over the course of the next couple of days she'll work her way through the *Alabama*'s hibernation decks, gradually reviving the rest of the crew. These people will have a hard enough time just learning how to walk again; after that, they'll spend two weeks in close confines. It won't do anyone much good to learn that they won't have as much food as they had when the ship departed from Earth. "Understood, sir," he says quietly.

"Thank you. Carry on." Lee waits until Shapiro has disappeared up the bend of the corridor, then he closes his eyes and lets out his breath. "Damn it, Les," he whispers to himself. "Why didn't you. . . ?"

What? Commit suicide? Give up his life for the sake of a hundred and three people who would remain in biostasis for the next two centuries? Perhaps that would have been the honorable thing to do, but Lee can't honestly say that he would have sacrificed himself had he been in the same position. Instead, he can only feel respect for someone who managed to stay alive on his own for more than thirty years. Alive, if not necessarily sane. . . .

Lee takes another moment to study the mural. The kids will probably love it, even if they don't know what it means. Then he continues down the corridor, heading in the direction of the hub shaft. Time to go below and see if Chief Monroe has found anything to be happy about.

URSS *Alabama* 8.27.2300 (12.7.2296 rel.) 1432 GMT

Jorge Montero found his son on Deck C7D, the wardroom one level below the ship's mess. Unlike their parents, Carlos and his sister Marie had recovered from biostasis fairly quickly: the advantage of youth. However, while Marie obediently remained by Rita's side while she languished in her bunk, it hadn't been long before Carlos found another teenage boy. Jorge had left his family for only a few minutes to fetch some water for his wife; when he returned he discovered that Carlos had vanished, leaving Rita distraught and Marie almost in tears.

Jorge stayed with Rita and Marie long enough to calm them down, then he went looking for his son. It wasn't easy; the Monteros had been assigned to three berths on Deck C4B, halfway down one of *Alabama*'s two habitation modules, and the decks themselves were mazes of lockers and double-decker bunks. By now almost everyone had been brought out of biostasis, and it seemed as if every square inch was jammed with people: squeezing past each other in the narrow aisles, waiting for their turn to visit the lavatories, sitting cross-legged on narrow bunks, chatting with one another in passageways. Noise everywhere: lockers opening and slamming shut, footsteps across metal floors, the constant hubbub of overlapping voices. It hadn't seemed as if there were this many people aboard when the ship left Earth. On the other hand, considering how happy everyone had been to escape with their lives, perhaps there simply hadn't been enough time for anyone to feel cramped before they went into hibernation.

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As Jorge made his way through the ring modules, though, his anger began to gradually subside. Although many of these people were strangers, quite a few were old friends . . . and almost all were fellow political dissidents who had been smuggled aboard the *Alabama* at the last minute. He found Henry Johnson leaning against the hatchway of the tunnel leading into Module C3; as Henry turned around, Jorge saw that he was talking to Bernie Cayle, another former colleague from Marshall Space Flight Center. No wonder he didn't recognize them at first; like Jorge himself, their heads were shaved. The three friends greeted each other with bear hugs and backslaps; although it seemed as if they had last seen each other only a few hours ago, they were all aware that 230 years had passed—226, if you counted in the time-dilation factor—since they entered biostasis. A few minutes later, upon climbing up the ladder to Deck C3A, he discovered Jim Levin and his wife Sissy sitting on their bunks. Another warm reunion, during which Jim told Jorge that he had seen Carlos only a few minutes earlier, along with a boy he didn't recognize. Sissy was upset because their sons, Chris and David, had taken off with Carlos and two other kids: a boy and a girl, whom neither of them had ever seen before. Jorge promised that he'd send their children home once he tracked them down. By now he was more amused than irritated. Nothing changes: teenagers tended to travel in packs, whether they were in a shopping mall or aboard a starship.

Yet his smile faded as he came around a corner and discovered four men seated together on a pair of lower bunks, their knees nearly touching as they blocked the aisle. Even without their hair or uniforms, he recognized them immediately: the URS soldiers who had boarded the *Alabama* shortly before launch, and who had still been in the ship when it left Highgate. Their leader was nowhere in sight; the men were quietly murmuring to one another when Jorge came upon them, and fell silent as their eyes turned in his direction. They regarded him with sullen contempt, not bothering to move aside so he could pass between them; they knew he was a D.I., and they despised him not only for what he was but also for his role in bringing them to this place. Jorge decided not to push his luck; he turned and went back the way he came, and heard coarse laughter behind his back.

Like the rest of the ship, Deck C7D is crowded, yet Jorge manages to spot Carlos as he climbs down the ladder into the wardroom. Accompanied by his new friends, the boy is at the far end of the circular compartment, gazing at something on the wall. Carlos doesn't notice his father until Jorge touches him on the shoulder; looking around to see who's come up behind him, his face turns red.

"Umm . . . hi, Papa," he quietly murmurs.

"Hi, yourself." Trying not to look relieved, Jorge gives his son a baleful glare. "Didn't I tell you to stay put?"

"Well, uh . . ." Carlos glances helplessly at his friends. "I kinda met up with some guys, and we, y'know . . ."

"Hi, Mr. Montero." Jorge looks up to see Chris Levin grinning at him. The same age as Carlos yet a little taller, Chris has been Carlos's playmate since they were both four-year-olds cavorting together in preschool day-care. "Hope you're not upset, but we wanted to see the rest of the ship, and . . ."

He shrugs with studied shamefacedness, and Jorge bites the inside of his lip. Handsome and outgoing, Chris has always been the natural leader of whatever group he's managed to gather around himself, and doesn't have much trouble manipulating adults either. And utterly unlike his younger

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brother; shy, stoical to the point of brooding, David looks up at Jorge, gives him a brief nod and a fleeting smile that quickly disappears.

"I'm not upset," Jorge says, speaking as much to Chris and David as to Carlos, "but your folks don't like you guys running off any more than I do." He turns his attention to his son. "If you want to go somewhere, tell Mama or me first . . . just don't take off like that, okay? This is a big ship, and it's hard to find someone with all these people around."

Carlos nods. He knows his father's upset, and he's grateful that he isn't punishing him in front of his friends. From the corner of his eye, Jorge spots a couple of other kids he doesn't recognize: another teenage boy, perhaps a year or two older than Carlos and Chris, and a girl who seems to be about David's age. "You want to introduce me to your buddies?" he murmurs softly.

"Uhh . . . yeah, sure." Carlos turns to the older boy, who shuffles uneasily from one foot to another. "This is . . . uhh . . . I forgot . . ."

"I'm Barry . . . Barry Dreyfus." He steps forward to extend his hand. "Sorry, Mr. Montero. I'm the one who got Carlos to follow me. Didn't think it'd get him in trouble."

"Glad to meet you, Barry." As Jorge grasps the teenager's hand, he's surprised by the strength in his grip. Yet, upon closer inspection, it occurs to him that Barry may not be all that much older after all, just big for his age. He seems like a nice enough kid, though. "Carlos isn't in trouble," he adds, giving his son a sidelong look, "if he doesn't do it again."

"I'm Wendy." The girl steps past Barry. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Montero."

"Pleased to meet you, too, Wendy." As Jorge shakes her hand, he can't help but notice that Carlos's face turns red once more. So his son has noticed her. No wonder; Wendy is a nice-looking young lady: slender build, pleasant face. She's found an *Alabama* mission cap somewhere, pulled it over her shaved head. She may only be thirteen or fourteen, but in a few years the boys will be fighting over her. Perhaps they already are. Although Carlos quickly looks away, Jorge can tell that he has his eye on her . . . and so does Chris, Jorge observes, noticing how the other boy immediately steps closer to insert himself between the girl and Carlos.

Jorge wants to ask Barry and Wendy who their parents are, yet his gaze follows Carlos' to the wall and suddenly his questions are forgotten. Painted across the bulkhead, stretching from the wallscreen to the rectangular porthole, is a long mural. A life-size portrait of a young man, apparently only a little older than the teenagers studying it, dominates the scene; he stands in a field of high yellow grass, his right hand clasped upon the pommel of a sheathed sword. In the background, looming above a range of snow-capped mountains, is an enormous ringed planet, and in the near distance can be seen what looks like a city: silver arches and towers and low dome-like structures, eerily familiar yet alien nonetheless.

Jorge finds himself mesmerized by the unexpected artwork. He had visited this deck only once before, shortly after the *Alabama* had escaped from Highgate. His memory might still be a bit fuzzy, but if this mural had been here then, he surely would have remembered it. "What . . . where did this come from?"

"There's another one like it in the ring," Chris says. "You didn't see it?"

Jorge shakes his head; in his single-minded determination to locate Carlos, he must have missed something he should have seen. The kids give each other incredulous looks, and Carlos gives his father a patronizing look. "Smell the coffee, papa," he murmurs under his breath.

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More than anything else, Jorge wishes he had some right now. "Who did this?"

"Someone was revived after we left Earth." This from David; for the first time, Chris's younger brother has chosen to make himself heard, even if his manner is as reticent as always. "It was an accident. One of the officers told us he spent thirty-two years all by himself."

"They found some books over there." Wendy points at the game table behind them; Jorge notices a pair of rectangular dust-shadows upon its surface, as if some large objects had rested there for a long time and only recently had been removed. "A couple of guys took them away. They told us he had written something, but they wouldn't say what it was."

Thirty-two years alone aboard the *Alabama*. Jorge's mind reels at the thought; he suppresses a shudder. No wonder he had painted the walls; he must have gone mad with loneliness. Yet he finds himself wondering who the young man is supposed to be. A self-portrait, perhaps? "I'm sure they'll tell us eventually," he replies.

"I can ask my dad," Wendy says. "He's a member of the flight crew . . . works in life support." Then she looks down at the floor. "Although he may not want to tell you guys anything," she quietly adds. "He's still pretty angry about what happened."

Wendy's father wasn't a member of the conspiracy that had hijacked the ship, Jorge suddenly realizes. He recalls hearing that a small group of crewmen tried to take control of the life-support deck just before the *Alabama* launched from Highgate and had to be subdued by force. Her dad must have been one of them. An uncomfortable silence. Carlos, Chris, and David are from D.I. families, and Barry is probably one of them, too; they don't know what to say, and Wendy herself appears sorry she raised the issue.

Time to change the subject. Jorge glances away from the mural, notices a three-dimensional chart displayed on the wall screen: a halo diagram of the 47 Ursae Majoris system, with a small luminous blip moving through the orbit of its outermost planet. "Hey, is that our present position?" he asks, pointing to the blip.

Barry glances at it. "Yes sir, that's us." He steps closer to the screen. "That's Wolf, the farthest planet," he says, gesturing to a round dot nearly halfway to aphelion from the *Alabama*'s position. "It's about five a.u.'s from its primary. . . ."

"What's an a.u.?" Wendy shrugs as the boys gape at her. "Hey, bust me . . . I don't know this sci stuff."

She doesn't? This is as much a surprise to Jorge as it is for the boys. Most of the D.I.s are scientists who had worked on the Starflight Project before they were blacklisted by the Internal Security Agency. These people usually tutored their children in the most rudimentary principles of the astronautical sciences at an early age; Carlos had memorized the major constellations before he was able to read, and the Levin children could recite the names of moons, planets, and nearby stars. Judging from the expression on Barry's face, Jorge has little doubt he can do the same. So why doesn't Wendy, whose father is an FSA-trained astronaut, recognize a commonplace astronomy term?

And what's her last name, anyway? Jorge didn't recall her mentioning it.

"Astronomical unit," Chris says. "The mean distance of Earth from the Sun. It's . . ."

"A measure of distance." Now Carlos has slid up next to Wendy, diverting her

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attention away from Chris. "The primary is the star . . . 47 Uma, to be exact." He points to the planets closest to the star. "That's Fox . . . it's point-four a.u.'s from Uma . . . and the next one out is Raven, which is point-nine a.u.'s . . ."

"Within the habitable zone." Not to be outdone, Chris gestures to Raven. "Not that anyone thinks it's habitable. . . ."

"And we're not sure whether Fox is really a planet," Carlos says quickly. "It's pretty small, so it may only be an large asteroid. . . ."

"Whatever." Chris gives Carlos a stern look, which Carlos accepts with a smug grin as he points to the fourth planet in the system. "Anyway, that's Bear. . . ."

"Ursae Majoris 47-B." Wendy suddenly asserts herself. "That's where we're going . . . or at least to its fourth moon. Coyote, right?"

"Uh-huh. It's about one million, seven hundred thousand miles from Bear." David speaks so quietly it seems as if no one except Jorge has heard him, yet Wendy favors him with a dazzling smile and David sheepishly looks down at the floor once more.

"That's Coyote, right," Carlos says. "They're all named after Native American deities. Dog, Hare, Eagle, Coyote, Goat. . . ."

"You forgot Snake," Chris mutters.

"Not until you reminded me," Carlos replies, and the others laugh as Chris glares at him.

Realizing that his presence is unwanted, Jorge quietly steps aside. Secretly, he's pleased that Carlos has made new friends as well as finding old ones; he only hopes there're more girls aboard besides Wendy, or the boys will murder each other for her smile. Better have that birds-and-bees talk pretty soon. . . .

He moves across the wardroom to the porthole. The shutter has been raised and several adults are clustered in front of the broad window, peering out into space. There's not much to see from this angle; 47 Ursae Majoris is still a distant object, brighter than any other star yet tens of billions of miles away, yet nonetheless everyone is captivated by the sight of the new sun. Bear lies directly in front of the ship, and therefore can't be seen from any of its ports; not until the *Alabama* draws closer will any of its satellites become visible to the naked eye.

Twelve days. In less than two weeks, the ship will have decelerated sufficiently so that it can successfully enter Bear's system, and then they'll find out whether their information was correct. 47 Uma-B has six major moons, this much is known for a fact, yet analysis of the spectroscopic data gathered by the Sagan Terrestrial Planet Finder led the JPL scientists to believe that only Coyote has conditions suitable for human settlement.

And if their estimates turn out to be in error. . . ?

"Papa? You okay?"

Now it's Jorge's turn to be surprised. Carlos has left his friends to come over to stand beside him. "I'm really sorry I ditched Mama and Marie," he says quietly. "I hope you're not still mad at me."

"No . . . no, I'm not." Peering over his shoulder, Jorge sees that the other kids have returned their attention to the mural. Once again, he notices that Wendy is the center of the circle, with Chris by her side. "Just don't do it again, please. I don't mind you hanging with your friends, but . . . well, things are different now. You understand?"

Carlos nods. He doesn't say anything, only stares out the window at 47 Ursae Majoris. Jorge follows his gaze, and for the first time he sees some-

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thing he hadn't noticed before: a thin brownish film that coats the inside of the thick glass, visible only when starlight touches it. Curious, he runs his finger across the porthole; it leaves behind a small trail, and now there's a dark smudge on his fingertip. Fungal growth? But how. . . ?

"Papa?" Once again, Carlos interrupts his train of thought. "Can I ask you a straight question?"

Jorge wipes off his hand on his trousers. "Sure. What do you want to know?"

Carlos hesitates. Then, almost in a whisper: "Are you scared?"

He considers this for a moment. "No, not at all," he lies, shaking his head. "Everything's going to work out fine."

A quiet rap upon the door. Lee looks up from the handwritten text he's been reading for the last hours, massages the corners of his eyes. "Come in," he says, closing the ledger upon his fold-down desk.

The pocket door slides open. Jud Tinsley stands just outside, with someone just behind him. "Colonel Reese here to see you, Captain," the Executive Officer says.

"Very good." Lee pushes the desk aside as Tinsley steps away from the door; just outside, framed by the narrow doorway, Reese stands at attention, hands clasped behind his back. Lee rises from his bunk. "Come in, Colonel, please."

Reese steps into the cabin, instantly taking up all the room left in the closet-size compartment. Once again, Lee is reminded that having private quarters affords him little more than the luxury of a single bunk and a bulkhead wall; no more than three people can fit into this tiny space, and only then if they're close friends . . . which, in this instance, doesn't include Reese.

"That'll be all, Jud," Lee says. "You can leave us now." Tinsley nods reluctantly, then slides the door shut. "Sorry I can't offer you a seat, Colonel, but this bunk is all the furniture . . ."

"I prefer to stand, sir." Reese assumes a rigid stance—hands at his sides, feet placed together, back stiff, chin tucked in—as if he's back on the parade grounds of the Academy. He wears a blue jumpsuit like everyone else's, but it could just as well be a Service dress uniform; his gaze doesn't meet Lee's, but remains locked straight ahead, fixed upon some point on the wall above the captain.

Lee sighs. "At ease, Gill. This isn't a review." He reaches for the intercom panel. "I was just about to call down to the galley, ask someone to bring up some coffee. Would you like some?"

Reese says nothing, and Lee takes his hand away from the panel. "However you want it, Colonel."

"Thank you, sir." Reese doesn't so much as bat an eye, yet any response is encouraging. Lee sits back on the bunk, folding his hands together across his stomach as he silently regards the colonel. Never once does Reese look in his direction; indeed, Lee imagines that, if he were to leave his quarters and go down below to fetch the coffee himself, the colonel would still be standing here when he returned.

Or perhaps not. And it's that uncertainty that needs to be addressed.

"Gill, we go back a long way," Lee begins. "We have much in common. Remember when I was a plebe at the Academy and you were an upperclassman?" No reaction. "You hazed me mercilessly, as I recall. Made my life miserable. But as much as I disliked the way you treated me, I never hated you. Truth is, I respected you highly, and I still do."

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"Thank you, sir."

Lee nods. "I have little doubt that feeling isn't reciprocated. You probably think of me as a traitor . . . and, quite frankly, you're correct. By taking the *Alabama,* I'm guilty of high treason against the United Republic of America. However, as I told you shortly before we went into biostasis, my loyalty isn't . . . or rather, wasn't . . . to the government, but rather to a higher power. The ideals of democracy, which I consider to have been stolen from the American people by the Liberty Party. Because of this, I . . ."

"Permission to speak candidly, sir."

"Granted. I want to hear what you have to say."

"The reasons why you hijacked this ship aren't of any interest to me. The fact remains that, by your own admission, you're a traitor to the Republic. As an officer of the United Republic Service, it's my sworn duty to remain loyal to my country. Therefore we have nothing in common . . . sir."

"I disagree." Lee sits up straight once more. "We're both aboard this ship."

"That means nothing, sir."

"No, Colonel, it means everything." Lee gestures to the comp panel above his bunk. "See the date? By Greenwich Mean Time, it's August 27, 2300 . . . although, by the ship's calendar, it's December 7, 2296. Either way you look at it, we left Earth over two and a quarter centuries ago. If the *Alabama* had been launched on the day the Declaration of Independence was signed, it wouldn't have arrived here until 2006. . . ."

"And your point is?"

Lee lets out his breath. "Gill, we're forty-six light-years from home . . . or at least what we used to call home. Since it's often difficult to realize just how far that is, let me put to you in less abstract terms. Yesterday I asked my com officer to transmit a message back to Earth, informing whoever might receive it that the *Alabama* has safely arrived at 47 Uma. No one will hear that message for another forty-six years . . . and if they decide to call back, we won't receive their response for nearly a hundred years from now."

For the first time, Reese blinks. Lee presses on. "Colonel, the Republic to which you've pledged allegiance is two hundred and thirty years in the past and over fourteen parsecs away. Whether it still even exists is a matter of conjecture. Subjectively speaking, it may seem to us that the *Alabama* left home only a few days ago, but so far as everyone on Earth is concerned, we're history."

Although Reese stubbornly maintains his poise, Lee notices that his hands have curled into fists. "However, you may still consider it your duty to retake control of the *Alabama*. If I were you, the thought might cross my mind. You've got four of your men aboard, after all, and there may be a few crewmembers who also remain loyal to the Republic." Judging from the expression on Reese's face, Lee can tell this notion has occurred to him. "Yet even if you were successful in inciting a mutiny . . . which is unlikely . . . and you were able to turn this ship around and return home . . . which we can't, because *Alabama* was designed for one-way travel only . . . it would mean that nearly five hundred years would have gone by since the day we left Earth." He shrugs. "I hope you're not expecting a medal, because it's going to be a long time for before you get it."

Reese no longer stares at the wall. His eyes have lowered to meet Lee's; it's hard to read what's going on behind them, yet nonetheless Lee can see that he's beginning to comprehend his situation. "Colonel, I don't blame you for attempting to stop us," he continues. "Again, if I was in your position, I

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might have done the same. You were acting under orders and I respect that. Yet you and your men refused to leave the *Alabama* when I gave you the chance to do so. . . ."

"Which makes us your prisoners." Reese's voice is cold.

"Not any more, no." Lee shakes his head. "I'm sorry I had to place you in biostasis, but there was no other way. I couldn't allow you to take one of the shuttles back to Highgate, because we'll need both of them once we reach Coyote, and I wasn't about to jettison you from the airlock, because that would have been murder. So technically you're stowaways." He pauses. "However, I hope you'll come to accept your situation, and decide to join us as crewmembers . . . reluctant or otherwise."

For an instant, it seems as if Reese might cave in. His stance relaxes a little, and there's a hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth. Sensing this, Lee starts to rise from his bunk, prepared to offer his hand in friendship. Then Reese's expression becomes glacial once more, and he looks away from Lee.

"Thank you for the offer, Captain," he says. "I'll present it to my men for consideration."

"That's all that I ask, Colonel." Or at least for the time being

"Yes, sir. Is that all, Captain?"

"Just one more thing. . . ." Lee glances down at the sheet of brittle notepaper he discovered on his desk shortly after he entered his quarters for the first time; like the ledger books, it's covered with Gillis's handscript. "Do you know a junior officer aboard this ship? One Eric Gunther . . . an ensign?"

"No, sir." No visible reaction. "Is there any reason why I should?"

Lee hesitates. "Perhaps not. I just thought you might have met him."

"That name is unfamiliar to me. May I go now, sir?"

Lee nods; he notes that Reese doesn't salute him before he turns to leave. Not that he was expecting him to do so; it's enough that the colonel knows where he and his men stand. Cooperation may or may not come later.

And as for Ensign Gunther . . . that remains to be seen.

The colonel lets himself out, sliding the door shut behind him. Lee lets out his breath, then reopens the ledger he was studying before Reese arrived. It's the first volume of the novel Leslie Gillis had written during his years of solitude; the unlucky crewman had filled thirteen ledger books, with a fourteenth found open on his makeshift desk, his pen still resting upon the sentence he had left unfinished before his mysterious death. Lee had two of his officers bring the ledgers to his quarters before anyone else had a chance to read them. From what little Lee has managed to skim through, however, Gillis's works comprise a long fantasy epic about the adventures of one Prince Rupurt; the captain believes that this is the young man who appears in the murals Gillis had painted in the ring corridor and the wardroom.

Yet this isn't what intrigues him. Once more, Lee turns to the first two pages of the first volume. Unrelated to everything else which follows, it appears to be Gillis's first-person account of having spotted a bright object— "a moving star," as he describes it—from the wardroom window.

Gillis didn't give a specific date when he spotted this anomaly—indeed, it seems as if he had taken pains to cover every chronometer within the ship, as if he didn't want to be reminded of how much time had passed—but he mentioned that the incident occurred about six months after his revival. This would be approximately nine months after *Alabama* left Earth; the ship would have been deep within interstellar space by then, far beyond the outermost reaches of the solar system.

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And then there's this passage, written in Gillis's plain handscript:

I'm not certain, but I'm almost sure—dead sure—what I saw was another ship. I don't know where it came from or where it was going. All my tries to contact it failed, yet there can't be any other explanation. Maybe I'm desperate, but it can't be an hallucination or any natural object. I know what I saw. I'm positive it was a starship.

Lee reads this part of the book again. Then, very carefully, he grasps those first two pages of the ledger, rips them from the binding. He takes a few moments to pluck out the scraps of torn paper, then he folds the missing pages in half and slips them into his shelf, hiding them between a pair of operations manuals.

He'll let others read Gillis's fantasy novel. In fact, he'll have someone scan them into the ship's library subsystem. From what he's read so far, it seems harmless—tales of a prince wandering across an alien world, that sort of thing—and it might entertain the children. Yet no one else must ever know what Les had seen—what he *thought* he had seen—during his lonesome ordeal.

Things are much too complicated as they are already.

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"Gentlemen, ladies, may I have your attention, please. . . ?"

Lee patiently waits for everyone to quiet down; only a few seem to have heard him, so he raps his knuckles on the table. "If I could have your attention, please," he says again, louder this time, "we'll get started."

The noise gradually subsides as the crowd turns their attention to him. The mess deck is filled to capacity, and then some; with the exception of a couple of officers who have volunteered to remain on duty in the command center, every man, woman, and child aboard the *Alabama* has shown up for the meeting. Every seat at the long benches that run down the center of the room has been taken; a couple of dozen people stand against the walls, while others sit cross-legged on the floor. A few are seated on the serving counter, and one person even stands upon the ladder leading down to the wardroom. No one's comfortable; the ship's mess was never intended to be occupied by nearly a hundred people at once.

"Thank you all for coming," Lee continues once the room has gone quiet. He stands at a table on one side of the compartment, the wall screen behind him. Seated on either side of him are the members of his executive staff. "Sorry about the crowded conditions, but it can't be helped. With any luck, this will be the last time we'll have to get together like this . . . or at least aboard ship. The next time we hold a general meeting, it should be where we'll have a bit more elbow room."

Laughter, some scattered applause. A small girl squatting on the floor—Marie Montero, if he remembers correctly—looks up at her mother, gives her a querulous scowl. "What does he mean?" she demands. "What's so funny?" Rita shushes the child, then picks the girl up and settles her in her lap. Lee can't help but notice that the mother isn't smiling.

She isn't the only one who's unamused. Leaning against the wall on the opposite side of the compartment is Colonel Reese, flanked by his troops. Reese stolidly gazes back at him, his arms folded across his chest; Lee observes that, while almost everyone else has either found *Alabama* ball caps

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or, as many of the women have done, tied kerchiefs around their shaved heads, the soldiers are wearing their Service berets. He also notes that the civilians are giving them plenty of room; one of the soldiers has propped a foot upon a bench, arrogantly taking up a place where someone could have been seated.

No. This sort of thing can't go unchallenged. "I think we have another place where someone can sit," Lee says, then he turns toward the man standing on the ladder and points to the bench where the solider is resting his foot. "We've got a seat for you over here, if you want to take it." Then he locks eyes with the soldier. "I'm sure no one will mind."

The guy on the ladder hesitates, then climbs down and makes his way toward the vacant seat. The soldier glares at Lee, then Reese whispers something to him and he reluctantly removes his foot from the bench. The civilian sits down in front of him, careful not to look his way. A few murmurs from around the room, which Lee pretends not to notice.

"As I was saying," Lee goes on, "I hope this will be the last time we'll have to meet like this, or at least while we're still aboard ship. Our present ETA for arrival at our destination is about twelve days from now. By shiptime that's December 19, 2296 . . . back on Earth, it's September 8, 2300. Since we're going by the ship's clock, the first date is the one that matters. Those of you whose watches are still on Earth time will want to reset the calendar function to this standard. However, we'll continue to use Greenwich Mean Time for timekeeping purposes for a little while longer."

Although the flight crew nod their heads, many of the civilians glance at one another in confusion. Lee was expecting this; indeed, that's the reason why he called this meeting. "There's a lot about all this that may seem strange," he says. "Although the flight crew has been specifically trained for this mission, many of the civilians—" he tactfully avoids using the term D.I., with all of its connotations— "are unprepared for what lies ahead."

Lee reaches into his breast pocket, pulls out a remote. "Our current position is here," he says as a three-dimensional diagram of the 47 Ursae Majoris system appears on the screen behind him, a small blip moving just within the orbit of Wolf. "About nine days from now, we'll begin final approach to 47 Uma-B. . . ."

Another touch of the remote, and the third planet in the system expands to fill the screen, its satellites revolving around the superjovian. The captain explains the makeup of the three inner satellites and the two outer ones; this is all redundant information to his crew and the civilian scientists who worked on the Starflight Project, yet there are quite a few spouses and children among them who may not know these things.

The screen expands again, this time to show a close-up of the fourth moon. Like the others, it remains a featureless sphere. "This is 47 Ursae Majoris B4, also known as Coyote. Until earlier today, this was as much as we knew about its physical appearance . . . everything else we knew about it was through infrared inferometry. A few hours ago, though, we were able to train the navigational telescope on Coyote, and this is what we saw."

As he turns toward the screen, he can hear the reaction: several audible gasps and whistles, murmurs of astonishment. Lee can't help but smile, for although the image is grainy and slightly out of focus, nonetheless it provokes wonder.

A earth-toned world, like a marble dyed in shades of green and light brown, criss-crossed by slender blue veins. There're distinct blotches of

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white at its poles—the icepack at the north is slightly larger than the one at the south—and skeins of hazy clouds obscure areas north and south of the equator. In a sequence of time-lapse photos, the planet slowly revolves on its axis, revealing a wide blue band that completely circles its equator. Oddly, the planet resembles the photographs made of Mars during the early twentieth century, the ones that led Percival Lowell to believe that the red planet was inhabited by a canal-building intelligent race.

The new world. Lee's careful not to let his emotions show as he turns toward the crew and passengers once more.

"There it is," he says quietly. "This is what we've come all this way to find."

Before he can go on, someone starts to applaud. It's picked up by others; people begin rising from their seats, putting their hands together, shouting at the tops of their lungs. He looks across the room, sees only gratitude, admiration, even adulation. Lee feels his face grow warm; being regarded as a hero is not something to which he's accustomed, nor was this something he ever expected. Embarrassed, he looks away, only to see that his senior officers—Shapiro, Tinsley, Murphy, Okada—have also risen to their feet. Even Sharon Ullman, who hadn't been part of the conspiracy and who had to be subdued by force when they took control of the *Alabama,* has joined in.

And yet, even in this moment of triumph, a small voice of doubt nags at him. Once again he remembers the night in Arizona when he lay paralyzed with fear as a hungry coyote prowled around his makeshift sleeping bag. . . .

So he takes a humble bow and says thank-you a few times, all while gesturing for everyone to be seated. After a minute or so the room grows quiet; this time the silence is respectful. He clears his throat and, not quite knowing what else to say, picks up where he left off.

"That's Coyote," he says, and raises his hand when someone tries to start the ovation all over again. "Its diameter is approximately 6,200 miles, and its circumference is 19,400 miles, with a planetary mass a little more than 75 percent that of Earth's. So it may be a moon, but still it's a rather large one . . . almost 30 percent larger than Mars. Which is why it's been able to retain an atmosphere. . . ."

"But can it support life?" someone calls out from the back of the room.

"In the past couple of days, we've managed to confirm our previous information." Lee fumbles with the remote; a jagged bar-graph is superimposed over the telescopic image. "Our new data shows the clear presence of water vapor, and since we've got absorption spikes . . . here and here, see . . . of carbondioxide and ozone, that tends to indicate the strong concentration of atmospheric oxygen and nitrogen, and therefore chlorophyll-producing activity upon the surface. So, yes, there's already life down there. The planet can support us."

More murmurs. Several people close their eyes, their shoulders slumping with released tension. A woman seated nearby raises her hand. "What about atmospheric pressure? Do we know anything about that yet?"

"We won't know for certain until we get there, but since the satellite . . . the planet, rather, for that's what it is, for all intents and purposes . . . is smaller and less massive than Earth, we can be sure that the air is thinner. Probably more or less the same pressure as you'd find in high-altitude regions back home, such as in the Rockies. That may cause us some problems at first, or at least until we've become acclimated." More hands are raised, but Lee quickly waves them off. "Let me get through this, please, then I'll field your questions."

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He opens another window on the screen: more statistics, displayed in columns. "Fortunately, Coyote isn't rotation-locked. Its orbit is far enough from Bear that it's able to rotate on its axis, with both hemispheres turning toward its primary during its day-night cycle—which lasts approximately twenty-seven hours. Because Bear's located 2.1 a.u.'s from its sun, which is beyond what has been previously considered to be the habitable zone, this should mean that Coyote is unable to support life. However, we've managed to confirm the theory that Bear reflects enough sunlight from Uma to warm the atmosphere sufficiently to allow for a greenhouse effect."

He points to the screen. "We've detected a strong magnetic field, which indicates that it has a nickel-iron core . . . probably some tectonic activity, too, which is good. Dog, Hawk, and Eagle are located within Bear's radiation belt, but Coyote lies outside that, and its magnetic field and atmosphere should shield us from any ionizing radiation. However, it's just close enough to Bear that the primary's gravitational pull probably draws away most of the meteors, so we shouldn't have to worry much about large impacts. And although Coyote follows a circular orbit around Bear, Bear's orbit around 47 Uma is slightly elliptical. That means Coyote probably has a regular change of seasons, and since there's no axial tilt, conditions will be the same in both the northern and southern hemispheres. However, considering that Bear's sidereal period . . . its year . . . is 1,096 Earth-days in length, that means those seasons will be very long . . . about nine months on average. What effect this has on the native lifeforms, we'll just have to see."

The room is quiet. Everyone gazes toward the screen, taking it all in. "Surface gravity is about 68 percent Earth's," Lee continues, pointing to another column. "That may sound good, but since we're also dealing with lesser atmospheric density, it doesn't necessarily mean we'll be any stronger. Since *Alabama* is currently at .45 g's and decelerating, we'll probably feel pretty sluggish once we set foot on the surface. I recommend that everyone do the daily exercises Dr. Okada has prescribed, otherwise we're going to have trouble walking when we get down there."

He points to another column. "However, this is what worries us the most . . . surface temperature. From what we've been able to observe, the average night-time temperature at the equator is about forty degrees Fahrenheit." Low whistles from the crowd, and several people shake their heads. "However, bear in mind that we're looking at Coyote's far side . . . that is, the hemisphere that currently faces away from Bear. It's likely that the daytime temperatures on the near-side may be much more temperate. Also, since Bear is about three-fifths of the way through its sidereal period, Coyote is currently going into what we might think of as late summer or early autumn. So although things are cooling off down there, it's not going to be that cold all the time."

Lee clicks back to the original image. "The fact that we're able to observe water channels tends to support this. The planet seems to be criss-crossed by a complex system of rivers and streams. No major oceans, just lots of channels . . . perhaps a couple of dozen, all interconnected to one another." He points to the irregular blue band wrapped around the center of the planet. "They seem to drain into a central equatorial river that gets broader on one side of the planet . . . almost the size of a large sea at one point. Again, this is something we'll have to see once we get closer."

He puts down the remote. "Anyway, that's the good news. Coyote appears to be habitable. It may be a bit chilly when we get there, but we're prepared

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for that . . . we've got plenty of cold-weather gear in storage, and nuclear-thermal generators to keep us warm until we set up the solar farms. It won't be easy, to be sure, but we'll manage."

He glances at Tom Shapiro. The First Officer says nothing, but nods ever so slightly. Next to him, Jud Tinsley stares down at his folded hands. Now comes the tough part . . .

"Here's the bad news," Lee says, his tone becoming more serious. "As many of you know already, we had an unforeseen . . . um, occurrence . . . during flight. One of our crewmen, Chief Communications Officer Leslie Gillis, was accidentally revived from biostasis about three months after we left Earth. We still don't know exactly why this happened, only that it was the result of a glitch in the ship's AI."

Here, he has to lie. Lee knows more about why Gillis was revived than anyone else aboard the ship, even Shapiro and Tinsley. But this isn't something he's willing to share with anyone, or at least not yet. "Mr. Gillis was unable to return to hibernation," he continues, "yet he survived for the next thirty-two years. The murals in the ring corridor and the wardroom are his work. You may have also noticed a fungal growth on some of the surfaces, such as on the windows. After he died, the food he left in the galley refrigerator went bad, and that caused a bacterial fungus to spread through certain areas of the ship. Dr. Okada assures me that it's harmless, but you should wash your hands if you've had any contact with it."

Uneasy looks pass from one person to another. Rumors had spread through the ship; now everyone knows the truth. "Les . . . Mr. Gillis . . . had to stay alive during this long period," Lee goes on, "and in order to do so he consumed rations that were meant to support the rest of us for our first year on Coyote." Now the expressions become those of alarm, even outrage. "We've taken inventory of our remaining rations, and have discovered the worst . . . our immediate food supply has been reduced by a little more than 30 percent. So instead of having a twelve-month surplus of food, we're down to about seven months. Perhaps less."

Someone yells an obscenity; several others slam their hands against the benches. Muted comments roll through the compartment. "What about water and air?" someone demands. "Or did he use up all that, too?"

"*Alabama*'s life-support systems were able to recycle his waste products into breathable air and water. However, our reserves have reduced by 20 percent. We've got plenty of air and water for the next two weeks or so, but our time aboard ship has been reduced by a considerable factor. Whatever else happens, we've got to land soon." There's no sense in mentioning all the other things Gillis had used up—clothing, paper and pens, art supplies—and no one needs to know about the enormous quantities of alcohol he had consumed from the contraband liquor Tom reluctantly confessed to having smuggled aboard. "Our major long-term problem here is a shortage of food. . . ."

"But six or seven months . . ." Jorge Montero shrugs. "That should get us by, shouldn't it? At least for starters."

"They'll last for awhile, yes . . . but by the time they run out, it'll be winter. As I said earlier, the seasons down there are three times as long as those on Earth. Even if we tighten the rations, we'll still run into severe shortages." Lee shrugs. "It doesn't make much difference, really. Even if we had full rations, a food shortage would have been inevitable. The rations were simply a precaution. What all this means is that we have to cut our survey time to a bare minimum, begin farming almost as soon as we establish the colony,

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and pray that we have enough warm weather to bring up a substantial crop before winter sets in."

He picks up the remote again, uses it to pull up a schematic diagram of *Alabama*. "The cargo and hab modules are designed to be jettisoned from the primary hull and air-dropped to the planet surface," he says, pointing to the seven cylinders surrounding the ship's hub. "Over the next ten days we'll get them ready for that, with essential supplies being transferred to the shuttles. Then, on day eleven, we'll send an advance party ahead of us in one of the shuttles. Mr. Shapiro here will lead that group."

The first officer briefly raises his hand, and the captain acknowledges him with a nod before going on. "His team will locate a suitable landing site and ascertain that the planet is capable of supporting human life. By then *Alabama* will have achieved low orbit. If all works well, the first group of colonists will depart on day twelve, using the other shuttle to rendezvous with the advance team. Once they've established a base camp, the first shuttle will return to *Alabama* to pick up the second group of colonists. The second shuttle will then return to *Alabama* to pick up the remaining crew members—including myself—who will by then have jettisoned the modules and repositioned the ship to permanent high orbit."

"And what if Coyote is unsuitable?" a woman asks. "I mean, what if the advance team discovers that we can't live there?"

"In theory, the colonists would return to biostasis while the fight crew studies our options . . . either return to Earth, or set out for another star that may have a planet capable of supporting life." Lee hesitates, and decides that telling the blunt truth is best for all concerned. "Realistically speaking, though, neither of those options are available. *Alabama* doesn't have enough reserve fuel left to achieve boost velocity, and if it can't attain 20-percent light-speed, the fusion ramjet won't work at maximum efficiency. We wouldn't be able to make it home, and we don't know of any other solar systems within our range that have planets capable of supporting human life. In other words, this is an all-or-nothing shot."

People shift nervously in their seats, give each other uncertain looks. Lee waits a few moments, giving everything he just said a chance to sink in, before he continues. "That means we've got to pull together to make this work. Any differences you might have had . . . whether you were actively involved in taking this ship or resisted it, whether you were once a D.I. or a Liberty Party member . . . must be put aside and forgotten. That's all in the past now. We're all in the same boat."

He wants to say more, but now is not the time. Maybe once they're down on Coyote. . . . "All right, that's it for now," he finishes. "Mr. Tinsley here will be drawing up rosters for the first and second landing groups. We need to keep the groups evenly divided, but we don't want to split up families if we don't have to, so if you have any specific preferences, please see him. And if you've got any further questions, come to me or Mr. Shapiro." He waits another moment, then raises his hands. "Very well. Meeting adjourned."

As Lee steps away from the table, crewmen and civilians begin rising from their seats. All around him, voices rise once again as people turn toward one another. Some head for the ladder while a few move toward him and Shapiro. Someone laughs out loud at an unheard joke, and a couple of others join in: a good sign, or at least so he hopes.

The captain casts a wary glance toward the back of the room, catches a brief glimpse of Colonel Reese. His men have gathered around him; it ap-

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pears as if they're having a quiet conference. About what, Lee can only imagine; he can only pray that Reese has spoken sense to them. The captain picks up his remote, turns toward a woman who's waiting to speak with him. . . .

And in that instant, through the crowd, he notices someone staring directly at him. A young ensign, in his late twenties, wearing an *Alabama* cap.

Eric Gunther: Lee recognizes him at once. Upon discovering the note Gillis left in his quarters, the captain checked his profile in the crew records. A recent Academy graduate, assigned to the *Alabama* only a few months before launch. Member of the life-support team. Someone Lee had only met once or twice before, and then only very briefly.

In that brief instant, their eyes meet and Lee sees only loathing, unforgiving hatred. Then Gunther turns away, melting into the crowd. Lee tries to spot him again, but he's already disappeared. There're too many people in the way . . . and Gunther, of course, doesn't want to be known by his captain.

Lee suppresses his apprehension; he turns toward a woman who has come forward to talk to him. Once again, though, he has heard a paw settle upon loose pebbles.

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Much to everyone's relief, the shuttles survived the voyage in satisfactory condition. Chief Murphy's engineers had spent the last two days inspecting the *Jesse Helms* and the *George Wallace,* entering the twin spacecraft to check their avionics systems and going EVA to make sure that their hulls were intact. Both shuttles had been drained of fuel shortly after *Alabama* left Earth; yesterday hydrogen was reloaded into their wing tanks, the nuclear engines test-fired. After nearly forty-eight hours of round-the-clock preparation, Dana reported that the shuttles were flightworthy and ready to be taken down to Coyote.

Tom Shapiro picked the *Helms* for the survey mission; this was the same craft he had piloted from Merritt Island to Highgate, and not only was he familiar with the way it handled, but he also wanted to close the circle by landing the spaceplane again, this time on the new world. Once the craft passed muster with Murphy's team, Tom spent several hours in the cockpit the night before, reacquainting himself with the controls and rehearsing emergency procedures that everyone hoped wouldn't be necessary. Sometime during the evening, though, a new thought occurred to him, one that he didn't share with anyone else.

Lee finds out about it only a few minutes before the *Helms* departs from *Alabama*. He's in the EVA ready-room on Deck H5, going over last-minute details with the First Officer, when a crewman emerges through the manhole leading to the hub access shaft. During the past eleven days *Alabama* has shed nearly all of its forward velocity; the magnetic sail has been collapsed and the passenger decks have returned to microgravity. As the crewman enters the deck head-first, Lee notes that he's hauling a nylon bag with something stuffed inside.

Tom looks away from the pad he and Lee have been studying, smiles as the crewman pushes himself over to them. "Ah-ha, Mr. Balis . . . you've found it?"

"Yes, sir." Balis glances nervously at the captain as he extends the weightless bag to Shapiro. "Sorry I took so long. It was in the cargo, but everything's been moved around so much up there, and I couldn't . . ."

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"Never mind. Just so long as you got it. Thanks." Shapiro takes the bag, turns to pass it to another crewman waiting near the open hatch of the docking collar. "Mr. LeMare, if you could stow this safely. . . ."

"Just a moment, Tom." Lee reaches out to intercept the bag. "I'm curious to see what you've had Mr. Balis locate for you."

Shapiro frowns, but surrenders the bag without argument. From the corner of his eye, Lee can see Shapiro's party. Like him and his co-pilot, Lt. Kim Newell, Dr. Bernard Cayle and Dr. James Levin are wearing spacesuits, their helmets tucked beneath their arms. No one really believes such precautions are necessary once the team reaches the surface, but Kuniko Okada insists they observe Federal Space Agency protocols for first landing, and as chief physician, has the final word. Cayle and Levin look uncomfortable in the bulky suits—as civilian scientists, they've never worn them before now—and Lee notes that they seem as mystified as Lt. Newell.

Shapiro waits patiently as the captain loosens the drawstring and peers inside. Lee expects to find a bottle of California champagne from the liquor supply, so he isn't shocked to find that his suspicion was correct; Les Gillis had consumed most of the booze, but bringing champagne was Tom's idea in the first place, so Lee can't begrudge his First Officer taking one of the few bottles left. Yet also within the bag is a large metal can; the captain pulls it out, examines it more closely: a half-gallon of red waterproof paint, intended for use in building permanent shelters. There's also a four-inch utility brush within the bag.

Lee looks up. "You want to paint an X on the landing site?"

"Perhaps I do, sir." Shapiro's expression remains neutral.

Lee waits another moment for a better explanation; when none is forthcoming, he shoves the can back in the bag and cinches it tight. "Go on, get out of here," he murmurs. "And leave some for the rest of us . . . the champagne, I mean."

Shapiro grins as he takes the bag from him. "Seriously, Tom," Lee adds, "don't take any chances down there. If you run into any trouble, button yourself up, then call back and tell us what you've found."

The grin fades as Tom solemnly nods his head. "You know I will." Then he turns to his team. "Okay, let's go. We've got a planet waiting for us."

"It's a moon, actually," Cayle murmurs as he watches Shapiro enter the docking collar. Newell takes a moment to give her captain a formal salute, which Lee returns before she follows Shapiro through the narrow hatch. Although he tries not to show it, Lee's grateful for the gesture. Unlike Tom, Kim Newell wasn't part of the conspiracy; in fact, he knows from reading her crew dossier that she was a Liberty Party member. Apparently, she's decided to put aside political differences for the sake of the expedition; the fact that she and Tom were once Academy classmates may have something to do with it.

Jim Levin hesitates, as if having second thoughts about volunteering his services as exobiologist, then he ducks his head and plunges in after Newell. Cayle waits until his friend has completely disappeared from sight before clumsily entering the hatch feet-first. The top of his head has barely vanished before LeMare shuts the hatch behind him and dogs it tight.

Lee pushes himself over to the porthole, peers out at the shuttle suspended within its cradle. After a minute or so, he spots Shapiro and Newell as they enter the glass frames of the bullet-nosed cockpit; its interior lights brighten for a few moments, then become dim. The shuttle's gull wings unfold from docking position, exposing the duel air-breathing ramjets mount-

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ed on the aft upper fuselage. Lee silently counts back from sixty; at the ten-second mark the cradle retracts its grip upon the vehicle. A few seconds later, there's a brief flare from the maneuvering thrusters; *Helms* glides upward from its cradle, trailed by sparkling motes of dust and frozen oxygen.

The shuttle falls away from the *Alabama*. For a few seconds it gradually recedes from view, its thrusters firing now and then. Then the main engine fires and the craft peels away, and suddenly the *Helms* is gone, disappearing beneath the starship's hull.

Lee remains at the porthole for another few moments. Then, almost reluctantly, he turns away, pushing himself toward the access shaft.

URSS *Jesse Helms* 9.7.2300 (12.19.2296 rel.) 1048 GMT

Coming out of the sun, the shuttle descends upon the new world, racing ahead of the dawn as it glides across the night terminator. As the spacecraft falls toward Coyote, a razor-sharp line rises from beyond the curved horizon, lancing straight up into space like a silver thread; a few moments later Bear comes into view, an immense orb the color of a robin's egg, its ringplane bisecting the superjovian in half.

"Will you look at that?" Newell's voice is an awestruck whisper. "Isn't that the most incredible thing you've ever seen?"

"Uh-huh. Beautiful." Shapiro barely glances up from his left-seat console. Coyote and its primary fill the cockpit's lattice windows, but he can't afford to let himself get distracted just now. Behind them, he can hear Levin and Cayle murmuring to each another; the scientists may have the luxury of sightseeing, but they don't. "Eyes down, Lieutenant. We'll be kissing air in about sixty seconds."

"Yes, sir. Sorry." Newell reluctantly returns her attention to the digital gauges on her instrument panel. "Altitude four hundred thousand, five hundred feet, velocity seventeen thousand miles per hour. Roll zero, yaw zero, pitch twenty-five degrees."

"Roger that." Shapiro gently pulls back on the yoke, hauling the shuttle's nose up to proper descent angle. He checks the attitude direction indicator; the eight-ball is right where it should be, the horizontal bar of the cross-hatch dead-center with the vertical bar, thirty degrees above the black. He taps his headset mike. "*Alabama,* this is *Helms*. Passing daylight terminator, preparing for atmosphere interface. LOS in forty-five seconds. Over."

A couple of moments pass, then a terse response: "We copy, *Helms*. Over." In a few more seconds they'll lose radio contact as the shuttle enters the ionization layer of Coyote's atmosphere. This was anticipated, of course, yet Shapiro still feels something clutch at his stomach. The safety net is about to disappear; they're on their own.

By now Bear has risen almost completely above Coyote. It seems almost impossible that anything in the universe could be so huge; Shapiro deliberately looks away, focusing his attention upon the planet below. The horizon has almost completely flattened out; through breaks in the cloud cover he can see a vast expanse of tawny brown landscape criss-crossed by intricate blue veins, with a broad blue band winding down its center. No oceans, only a couple of silver-blue patches which could be seas or large lakes, each interconnected by a maze of channels. A river world.

"Ground track."

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"Ten north, one-sixty northwest. Just above the equator." Newell studies the digital map of Coyote's surface; composed only a couple of days ago through radar imaging, it isn't very detailed, yet it's the best they have. "Altitude three hundred eighty thousand feet, velocity . . ."

She's interrupted by a sudden thump against the bottom of the fuselage. From the behind them Shapiro hears Cayle yelp in alarm. "You're strapped in tight back there, aren't you?" he calls over his shoulder, not taking his eyes away from his instruments. "This may be rocky."

"We're okay." This from Jim Levin. "Don't worry about us."

"Just checking." Shapiro can already see an orange-white corona beginning to form around the shuttle's nose; the *Helms* is beginning to enter the atmosphere. Another thump, then a sickening plunge; the eight-ball confirms that their approach is a little too steep. He compensates by pulling back on the stick. The ADI moves up by two more degrees and there's a gentle sensation of rising as the shuttle's wings bite into the thin air, yet he doesn't dare relax. Looks like a nice planet down there; it would be a shame to mess it up with a new impact crater. . . .

And so they go, ever downward, the cockpit windows becoming opaque as a sheath of superheated air cocoons itself around the spacecraft. The hull softly creaks and groans; Newell calls out numbers every few seconds. Shapiro's wrists begin to ache from clutching the yoke.

Long minutes pass, then the orange haze gradually dissipates and suddenly they're in clear air: a wall of dark blue sky above him, a long smooth expanse of terrain directly below. Only a few clouds between him and the ground: some stratocumulus formations, but that's all. Bear has reappeared, still looming large within the sky, but now it seems a little farther away, its blue-white hue faded by the atmosphere.

"Altitude one hundred eighty thousand," Newell says before Shapiro can ask. "Velocity eight thousand three hundred."

"Switchover to ramjets." Shapiro reaches to the panel between them and clicks a double row of toggles. There's a hard lurch as the airbreathers come online. He looks to the left, peers out through his side window. Wispy white contrails stream away from the wingtip and port stabilizer; the shuttle has become an aircraft once more. He shuts off the main engines, glances over at Newell; the color has left her face, but she gives him a wan smile.

"*Alabama,* this is *Helms,*" he says aloud. "Do you copy, over?"

"Roger that, *Helms,* we copy." Now the voice is clear, with little static. "Good to hear you again. Confirm present position, over."

Newell checks her panel. "Bearing . . . ah, twelve north, one-three-eight northwest."

"All systems nominal, *Alabama.*" His gaze shifts across his instruments. "Fuel level at 51 percent."

"We copy. How's the terrain? Over."

Shapiro reaches over to the com panel, switches on the bow camera. *Alabama*'s flight team should be able to receive an image by now, but they're depending upon his first-hand judgment, so he gazes through the cockpit windows. To his right, the vast blue expanse of Coyote's equatorial river, so wide at some points that its southern banks nearly vanish beyond the horizon. Directly below and to his left, though, there's solid ground; they're above what looks like a small continent, with a jagged ridgeline running northwest from the northern riverbank to, in the far distance, what appears to be high mountain country. To the east are what appear to be alluvial

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plains, stretching away from the base of the range. He doesn't put down anywhere near highlands, though; thermal updrafts could cause problems for the cargo modules once they're dropped from orbit.

"Nothing promising yet. It's pretty steep right around here, and I don't . . ."

"Sir?" Newell points ahead of them. "Look there . . . eleven o'clock low."

Shapiro gazes in that direction. Past the edge of the continent, a broad channel empties into the equatorial river. Just past the delta, though, he sees what appears to be a large, tooth-shaped land mass. No mountains, or at least none that he can see from this altitude, yet as they come closer he can just make out another channel on its far side. An island, albeit an enormous one; as a guess, he estimates that it's several hundred miles long, perhaps half as much at its widest point.

"Hold on, *Alabama*. We may have something. Going in for a closer look." He turns the yoke a few degrees to the left and pitches the nose forward, dropping altitude while making a shallow northeast turn. The horizon tilts to one side; after a few moments he levels off but continues the descent, reaching down to his center panel to raise the wing ailerons.

Now they're at fifty-five thousand feet, airspeed five hundred miles per hour. Shapiro looks out the window again, studies the island directly in front of them. As he suspected, the two channels he spotted earlier converge at a narrow confluence at its northern tip, making it independent from both the continent they had spotted earlier and two more lying to the east and northeast, with the equatorial river forming its southern boundary.

"Do you see this, *Alabama*?" he asks.

"We got it, *Helms*." He recognizes Lee's voice; the captain has taken over the mike from his com officer. "Tell us what you're looking at."

"It's an island, skipper . . . a subcontinent, really. I'd say it's about seven hundred miles long, three or four hundred miles wide at its center. Terrain looks nice and looks flat . . . no mountains, no volcanoes . . . with four or five major rivers crossing it from northwest to southeast and draining into the major channels to the west and east."

"Sounds good. What does your team say?"

Shapiro turns to call back to Levin and Cayle, and is surprised to find that both men have already unbuckled their harnesses and come forward to the cockpit, where they crouch together between the pilot's and copilot's seats. Levin touches his own mike. "I concur with Commander Shapiro, Captain. It's isolated from everything else, but more than large enough for our purposes. With any luck those rivers are fresh-water."

"I don't know." Cayle appears skeptical. "We could travel further east, follow the main river and see what else we find."

"Our present bearing is ninety-two west, twelve north." Newell studies her map. "That puts us slightly above the equator, about halfway around the western hemisphere. There may be more islands at zero-zero and zero-ten, but I can't tell for sure."

Shapiro checks the fuel gauge. Down to 42 percent. Still enough left in the tanks to make the flyby Cayle suggests, and *Helms* should be able to refuel itself from the hydrogen in the planet's atmosphere. Yet the shuttle has to land to be able to do this, and if the indigenous propellant conversion system were to fail for some reason, they would barely have enough fuel available for an emergency return to *Alabama*.

As if reading his mind, Newell points to the map, holds up two fingers, then makes a fist three times. "I don't agree, Captain," he says. "We're two

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thousand miles from zero-zero, and I'd prefer not to burn more fuel than we have to. I vote to land here."

It's his call, of course, but Newell nods her head and Levin gives him a thumbs-up. Cayle hesitates, then reluctantly nods as well. "We concur, *Helms,*" Lee responds. "Take her down. We'll continue our survey from orbit. Over."

"We copy, *Alabama.* Beginning final descent. Over." He clicks off the headset, looks back at the two scientists. "Strap in. We're landing." Shapiro waits until Levin and Cayle have retreated to the passenger compartment, then he turns to Newell. "Okay, Kim," he murmurs, "just pretend we're in the simulator . . . only no second chances this time."

She grins at him. "You mean you'll buy the beer if I get us down without crashing?"

"What's that about crashing?" Cayle shouts from behind them.

Newell squeezes her eyes shut and mutters something beneath her breath. "Never mind, Bernie," Shapiro replies. "Bad joke."

One last systems check, then Shapiro banks hard to starboard, pushing the yoke forward as he takes the shuttle down in a shallow gyre. The wings bite into thicker air; he hears wind whistling past the fuselage, feels the stick tremble within his grasp. He's landed shuttles nearly a dozen times, yet before now he's always known exactly where he was going: paved strips on Merritt Island, southern California, or west Texas, where there would always be a double row of landing beacons and the soothing voice of a ground controller to help guide him in.

Which is what makes this landing feel so surreal. Shapiro has been a pilot nearly all his life—his first flight was at age fourteen, when he climbed behind the stick of his uncle's homebuilt ultralight—but never before has he ever seen a landscape as empty as this. Vast tracts of what look like grassy savanna, with a labyrinthine network of streams running between dense wooded areas—but no roads, no plowed fields, no buildings of any sort. Flying over the most remote desert on Earth, there's always some sign of human habitation, even if it's only a dirt road. Here, there's nothing of the kind, only wilderness. Intellectually, he expected this, yet knowing that Coyote is uninhabited is not the same as seeing it for himself.

Leveling off at three thousand feet, he follows a low ridgeline running along the eastern channel until he makes a northwest turn and flies inland, tracking a narrow river as it meanders through marshland. Newell continues to read him numbers, then her breath catches as, just for a instant, they catch a glimpse of something that looks like a bird, yet not like any bird seen on Earth—something like a cross between a hawk and a small pterodactyl—soaring beneath them. In a moment it's gone, but it's all Shapiro can do to keep himself from craning his neck to see where it went.

"Did you see that?" Newell's eyes are huge.

"Uh-huh." Shapiro grins back at his co-pilot, then nods toward the console. "C'mon, pay attention to your board, or you're buying the drinks."

Now they're nearly thirty miles inland. The terrain is utterly flat, not a hill in sight; nothing but high meadow cut through by the river. "Looks like as good a place as any," Shapiro says, and Newell nods in agreement as he touches his headset mike. "*Alabama,* this is *Helms.* Going for touchdown."

"We copy, *Helms.* Good luck. Over."

Shapiro throttles down the jets, then powers up the VTOLs. The hull shudders as the shuttle comes to a near-standstill in midair; the nose comes

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up for a moment, then settles back to a horizontal position. He nudges the yoke forward a little, glances at the eight-ball, sees that they're in perfect trim. "Wheels down," he says and Newell reaches up to click a row of toggles. A grinding sound as the landing gear fold down from their wells. "All right, let's take it nice and easy. . . ."

The shuttle slowly descends upon the grasslands. Newell recites the altimeter readings—one thousand, nine hundred, eight hundred, seven hundred—while Shapiro keeps his right hand loose on the yoke, ready to grab the throttle and climb back to higher altitude should anything go wrong. But nothing like that happens; at four hundred feet, he increases vertical thrust, and at two hundred he inches it up a little more. Through the cockpit windows he can see the high grass spreading away from them, flattened out by the jet blast.

"One hundred feet . . . seventy . . . sixty . . ."

His mouth is dry. Shapiro licks his lips, prays that he's not setting down in a swamp. Yet between clearings in the grass he can see what looks like dry ground; this gives him confidence, so he continues the descent.

"Thirty . . . twenty-five . . . twenty . . ."

Tufts of grass and dark brown dirt fly up around the cockpit, littering the windows with debris. Something that looks like a tiny grasshopper skitters down the pane in front of him, falls off the side. Even at this moment, Shapiro can't help but note that a half-dozen generations of exobiologists would have sold their souls for this experience.

"Fifteen . . . ten . . . nine . . . eight . . ."

"That's okay, Kim," he murmurs. "I can take it from here."

Instinctively, relying on nothing more than his feel for the craft, he pulls the throttle back to nearly vertical position. A dense roar that shakes him within his seat, and then a solid *whump* against the undercarriage as the wheels meet the surface.

"Contact." He shoves the throttle firmly into lock position. "Engines down." The craft rocks a little on its gear, then settles down. "All systems nominal," he says, checking his board. "Safe engines." Newell follows his lead by switching off the VTOLs; she glances at him, briefly nods. Shapiro lets out his breath, touches his mike. "*Alabama,* we're on the ground."

No response for several seconds, longer than would be necessary to receive verbal communication from *Alabama*. For a moment, Shapiro wonders whether they've lost telemetry, then from behind him he hears Cayle and Levin yelling at the top of their lungs. There must be the same reaction aboard the ship; he can only imagine the scene within the command center, if not throughout the entire vessel. . . .

"*Helms,* this is *Alabama*." Now he hears Captain Lee's voice, if only faintly; there's a lot of noise in the background. "We copy you safe and on the ground. Thanks, Tom. We've got a lot of smiling faces up here."

Shapiro looks first at Newell, then back at Levin and Cayle. "And four more here, skipper. I think . . ."

He hesitates, just long enough for Newell to notice his reticence. "I think the pilgrims would have approved," he finishes. "We'll be in touch. *Plymouth* over and out."

Newell gives him a sharp look. "Plymouth?"

He doesn't reply as he switches off the radio. Let her wonder. . . .

FSA mission protocols for first landing called for them to put on their hel-

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mets, pressurize their suits, and exit the shuttle through the small airlock located in the rear of the passenger compartment. Yet even as they prepared to disembark, one look at everyone's faces told Shapiro that no one relished that idea. For one thing, the airlock could accommodate only two people at a time; Levin and Cayle would have to remain aboard for ten more minutes, waiting for the airlock to recycle before they could join him and Newell on the surface.

And second, how necessary was it for them to wear EVA equipment on a planet which had a oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere? Although Jim Levin pointed out that the air would be rife with microorganisms against which they had no natural immunity, the normally cautious Bernie Cayle surprised the others by countering that this was a risk that the colonists would have to confront eventually, so they might as well get it over and done with now.

In the end, Shapiro made the final decision: they'd roll the dice and leave the shuttle through the forward hatch. As expected, no one disagreed. So they spent a few minutes struggling out of their cumbersome suits, then Newell twisted the lockwheel that unsealed the floor hatch.

A loud pop, followed by a prolonged hiss as overpressurized cabin air floods through the open hatch. Shapiro opens a candy-striped panel above the hatch, flips a pair of toggles and presses an orange button; the boarding ramp grumbles as it folds down upon its pneumatic jacks. Everyone gives each other one last, hesitant look, as if waiting to see who's going to die first.

"Come on," Shapiro says quietly. "Let's see what's down there."

He leads the way down the ramp, his boots clumping on the metal steps. The outer hull ticks softly as it sheds the last of the entry heat. The blast from the VTOL jets has flattened the grass in a wide swath around the shuttle; he observes that the forward landing gear has sunk a couple of inches into the ground, with dirt sprayed across the tires and the wheel brace.

Shapiro halts at the bottom of the ramp, turns to look at the others. "Any historic words, anyone?"

"'One small step for man . . .'" Bernie begins, and Newell and Levin laugh.

"It's been done." Then, not knowing what else to say or do, Shapiro steps off the ramp.

The ground is firm, yet moist and loamy; two more steps, and both feet are on the ground. He slowly walks out from beneath the fuselage, and now he feels warm sunlight upon his face. He takes a deep breath; the air is thin and for a few moments he feels giddy, as if he's standing on a high mountain plateau, yet he can taste the high, rich scent of summertime: sun-baked meadows, morning dew, fresh mud.

He turns, taking it all in. Thick, tawny grass the height of his shoulders, stretching as far as the eye can see, with clouds of tiny insects swarming above them like white motes of dust. A few dozen yards away, a small cluster of brown plants that look like onions the size of medicine balls, bright orange flowertops resembling irises protruding from their tops upon long, thin stalks. In the distance, he can make out a grove of trees: black, twisted trunks from which thick dark branches spread upward and outward, flattening out at the top like enormous Japanese bonsai.

He looks back toward the shuttle, and his breath catches as he sees Bear looming above the western horizon, larger than any mountain he's ever seen. 47 Ursae Majoris, smaller than Earth's sun and half as brilliant, rises from the east, casts a silver tint across Bear's rings until their leading edges fade from view in the depths of the dark blue sky.

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And it's quiet. Only the soft rustle of an Indian summer breeze as it moves through the grass, the rhythmic purr of something that sounds a little like cicadas, only lower-pitched. Again, he realizes that this place has never felt the human presence. Even if he had decided to quote Neil Armstrong, those words would have been inappropriate, for those words had been spoken on the Moon, a world that had always overlooked Earth. Yet, although Coyote might bear some superficial resemblance to his home planet, it's not Earth. . . .

A sudden slap, a muttered obscenity. Shapiro looks around to see Bernie Cayle remove his hand from his neck. "Damn mosquito." Then he examines his palm more closely, raises his eyebrows. "Maybe not. You should see the wings on this thing. . . ."

First contact. Shapiro grins, but says nothing.

"I think it's time to pull out the med kit." Levin starts walking back to the shuttle. Everyone has been inoculated, but Okada told them not to take any chances. "Where do you keep it, commander?"

"It's back in the cargo net. The case marked with a red cross." Shapiro begins to follow Levin toward the shuttle, then he feels a soft hand close around his wrist. He turns, finds Newell standing next to him. Perhaps she's been here all the time, but he simply hasn't noticed.

"Don't worry," she says softly. "He'll find it." She lets her head fall back, and the warm sunlight catches the soft stubble of dark hair on her scalp. Not for the first time, Shapiro observes that Kim Newell is a very beautiful woman. "Oh, God, can you believe it? It's like Eden or something. . . ."

He almost laughs out loud. "You know, no offense, but that's the worst cliché in the book. . . ."

"It is?" She gives him a coy smile. "Which one are you talking about?"

The one in at least a dozen bad stories he read as a kid. He starts to answer, then thinks better of it. "Never mind. I'll tell you some other time." Trying not to be rude, he gently slips his arm from her grasp. "I think we better let *Alabama* know we're safe. And see about setting up camp . . . lieutenant."

"Of course." Whatever romantic impulse seized Newell fades away; now she's an officer once more. She steps away, her face reddening. "Sorry, sir. Didn't mean to . . ."

"Don't worry about it." He almost says *forget it,* but he doesn't want her to do that. "Let's do what we've been sent here to do. All right?"

"Sure." She hesitates. "Just one thing. When you signed off . . . I mean, when you ended contact with *Alabama* . . . you did so as *Plymouth,* not *Helms*. What did you mean by that?"

Shapiro shrugs. "The same thing you meant when you called this place Eden." Her smile returns, but this time there's a hint of confusion in her eyes. He cocks his head toward the shuttle. "Find that paint can I brought aboard, and I'll show you."

URSS *Alabama* 9.27.2300 (12.19.2296 rel.) 1732 GMT

Like virtually everywhere else aboard the *Alabama,* Deck C4B is a scene of chaos barely under control. Cardboard boxes packed with personal belongings lay everywhere, lashed to the floor by elastic cords, while bunk cushions are being rolled up and passed hand over hand to people waiting to carry them to the cargo modules. Crewmen and passengers are busy

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stripping Module C4 to the bulkheads; as Jud Tinsley makes his way through the narrow aisles, he has to twist and turn every few feet to avoid collision with someone else.

The Executive Officer dodges a crewman using an electric screwdriver to unbolt a wall terminal as he follows the numbered plaques fastened to the bunk frames; after a minute, he locates berths C4B-09 through C4B-12. At first, it seems no one is there; he's about to turn away when he hears someone quietly tapping at a keypad. Tinsley ducks his head, pushes aside the curtains of a lower bunk to peer within.

Hidden in its shadows, a teenage boy floats upside-down, his legs crossed as if in sitting position. He holds a pad within his hands, his face backlit by the pale blue illumination of the screen he's reading. On the other side of the bunk, a little girl is curled up in a fetal position, clutching a pillow in her sleep.

"Excuse me," Tinsley says softly, and the boy looks up—or down, rather—from his pad. "I'm looking for Jorge and Rita Montero . . . have you seen them?"

"That's my parents." The kid says, glances at the girl to make sure she hasn't been disturbed. "Aren't they out there?"

"No they aren't." Tinsley gives him a smile. "That's why I'm asking you. Your dad wanted to see me about shuttle assignments." As he speaks, he opens his own pad, checks the crew roster. This would be Carlos Montero and his sister Marie.

"Oh, yeah. Right. I know what this is about." Carlos thumbs the top of his pad, bookmarking his place. "Papa saw we're . . . I mean, my mother, my sister, and me . . . are on the first shuttle, but he's on the second, so he wants to see if he can trade seats with someone on the first shuttle so he can fly down with us. That's what this is about . . . sir, I mean."

The kid gives him a respectful and unnecessary salute; Tinsley grins as he returns the gesture. "At ease, Mr. Montero. Let me check." This isn't the first request of this kind he's had to handle; although Captain Lee promised not to split up any families, the logistics of seating arrangements have made this difficult to keep. As the XO scrolls down the roster, he notes that the boy has returned his attention to his pad. "What's that you're reading?"

"*The Chronicles of Prince Rupurt.*" Carlos doesn't look up. "I'm at the part right after he's met the Duchess L'Enfant and fought the Boids."

That's the long novel Les Gillis wrote. Several days ago, Captain Lee requested that its handwritten pages be scanned into *Alabama*'s library system; Tinsley has heard that some of the kids have downloaded the book into their pads, but this is the first time he's actually seen someone reading it. "Is it any good?" he asks, and Carlos nods in a distracted way; he's completely absorbed by the story. "Think I might like it?" The boy shrugs noncommittally, an expression of mild annoyance upon his face.

The XO is about to inquire how much he's read so far when he hears someone coming down the aisle. Looking around, he sees Jorge Montero gliding past the row of empty bunks. "Oh, hey, I was just trying to find you," Tinsley begins. "Your son tells me you're . . ."

"You've found him?" Montero glares past him into the bunk, spots the kid. "I thought I told you to help your mother pack the medical equipment."

Carlos blanches. "She wanted me to baby-sit Marie. She was getting in the way and Mama wanted her out of there, so she told me to take her back up here and keep on eye on her. . . ."

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"Sure she did." Montero pushes himself forward, almost shoving Tinsley out of the way. "I bet you just wanted to read some more."

Carlos is about to retort when Tinsley decides to intercede. "Maybe, but he's doing a good job of holding down the fort. If he hadn't told me what you wanted, I might have given up on trying to find you."

Montero looks up at him. "He's already talked to you?" he asks, and Jud nods. Somehow, throughout all this, his daughter has remained asleep; either that, or she's chosen to stay out of the argument by playing possum. Her father relents a little. He bends down to peer into the bunk. "Okay, c'mon out of there and go help Mama. I'll keep an eye on your sister."

Carlos closes his pad and shoves it in his pocket, then pulls himself out of the bunk. He gives Tinsley a brief smile of gratitude before he shoves off, almost colliding with a crewman as he coasts down the aisle. "And don't let me catch you goofing off again!" Montero yells after him, then he gives Tinsley an apologetic shrug. "Kids. . . ."

Tinsley wants to tell Montero to ease up on his son; last time he checked, the situation in Deck C7A was under control and Dr. Okada didn't need any more volunteers. But this was obviously a family matter, and none of his business. "Yes, well . . . anyway, he told me that you want to trade seats with someone on the first shuttle so the four of you can stay together."

"Uh-huh." Montero turns so that he can study Tinsley's pad from over his shoulder. "I don't know how we got separated, but that's what happened. If you can move someone else to the *Helms* so I can go down on the *Wallace*. . . ."

"I don't know how it happened either, but we've still got a problem." Tinsley runs the cursor down the passenger manifest for the *Wallace,* the shuttle scheduled to ferry the first group of colonists down to the surface after—or rather, *if*—Tom Shapiro's team reports that conditions on Coyote are satisfactory for colonization. "I've been reshuffling seat assignments all day, and right now every seat on the *Wallace* is taken. You're just one of several families who want to stay together, and with two children you're one of the larger ones. It's going to be hard for us to . . ."

"Oh, c'mon!" Montero's temper begins to rise once more. "Who helped you launch without authorization? Don't you owe me something for that?"

Yes, you did, Tinsley says silently. And for your efforts, you've already received your reward: safe passage for you and your family away from the Republic, which otherwise would have detained you within a government re-education center for the rest of your lives. So count your blessings. . . .

"I'll try, but I can't promise anything." Tinsley shuts his pad. "If you can find someone who's willing to trade seats with you, I'll be more than happy to oblige, but right now everyone wants to get off this ship as soon as . . ."

"Sir . . . excuse me?"

Tinsley looks over his shoulder, finds the crewman he spotted a moment ago coming down the aisle: a thin young man wearing an *Alabama* ball cap. The name patch above the breast pocket of his jumpsuit reads *Gunther, E.*

"Yes, Mr. Gunther? Can I help you?" Tinsley barely recognizes him; another low-rank member of *Alabama*'s crew.

"Pardon me for eavesdropping, sir, but . . ." Gunther hesitates. "Well, I think I can help out here."

"Oh? If you have a suggestion . . ."

"Well . . . I'm on the list for the *Wallace,* but there's no real reason for me to go down that early, other than to help set up camp. If it's all the same with you, sir, I could trade seats with . . . um, this gentleman here."

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Jorge becomes hopeful. "You'd do this? I would be most grateful."

"It's a good idea, but . . ." Tinsley opens his pad again, rechecks his list. "It's not going to be that easy. We're trying to keep crew members and colonists evenly dispersed. If I move you onto the *Helms,* that means there's going to be one less crewman aboard the *Wallace*. . . ."

"Then I'll ride down on the *Wallace* when it makes its second trip." Gunther shrugs. "I can stay behind to help with the close-out."

Tinsley raises a eyebrow. A small group of crewmembers is slated to remain aboard the *Alabama* until the end; their job will be to jettison the cargo and habitation modules, then assist Captain Lee with preparing to insert the ship to high orbit. Almost no one has volunteered to remain aboard the ship; now that they've reached Coyote, everyone is anxious to leave its cramped quarters and breathe fresh air once more. Indeed, there's been much grumbling among the half-dozen or so crewmen Tinsley recruited for the job; it may be the captain's duty to be the last person to leave the ship, but that doesn't necessarily mean anyone who joins him has to be happy about it.

"If you don't mind doing so. . . ."

"Not at all. I'm sure the captain could use an extra hand." Then Gunther smiles and pats the bulkhead. "And I'd kind of like to see the old lady one last time."

"Suit yourself." Crooking his elbow around a bulkhead rail to anchor himself, Tinsley moves Jorge Montero's name from the *Helms* to the *Wallace,* then adds Eric Gunther's name to the short list of crewmen who've been drafted to the close-out team.

"Thank you, sir," Jorge says to him, then he turns to Gunther. "And thank you, too . . . I'm in your debt."

Still smiling, Gunther shakes his head. "Think nothing of it. It's my pleasure." Then he glances at Tinsley. "If you'll excuse me, sir. . . ."

Tinsley nods, and watches as Gunther pushes himself away. How fortunate that he should come along at exactly the right time . . . and yet, it's odd that he can't remember his face or name. Jud thought he'd come to know everyone who had gone through flight training, regardless of whether they had been involved in the conspiracy, but this ensign is unfamiliar to him. Of course, with more than fifty crewmen aboard . . .

"Glad we could work that out," he says, snapping his pad shut. "I'll let you get back to work." He hesitates, then softly adds, "And don't be so hard on your son, okay? We're not on a deadline here."

Embarrassed, Montero nods and glances away. Tinsley gives him a pat on the shoulder, then kicks off the side of the bunk and floats back down the aisle. One more job done, about two dozen more to go. Maybe there's still some coffee left in the wardroom. Unless, of course, that's been packed away, too. . . .

His headset chirps, and he touches the mike. "XO here."

"Dwyer here, Cargo C6D. We may have a problem, sir. . . ."

"Go ahead, Mr. Dwyer. What do you got?"

"Sir, I've just inventoried the small-arms locker. We're missing a weapon."

Unsure of what he's just heard, Tinsley reaches up to the ceiling, grabs a rail to brake himself. "Come again?"

"A gun, sir. I've just checked the armaments locker. The cargo manifest shows ten .38 parabellums stored in Bin C6D-13F, but when I opened it a few minutes ago I discovered only nine, with an empty wrapper where the tenth one should be. And when I checked the ammo in the next bin, I found that a magazine had been taken as well."

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Tinsley feels a chill. *Alabama* carries a small supply of rifles and hand guns among its survival equipment, just in case Coyote has hostile natives. No one ever believed it would be necessary to keep them under lock and key; on the other hand, no one ever believed that anyone except loyal URS citizens would be aboard. Besides, access to firearms was one of the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Second Amendment of the Revised Constitution. A nice idea . . . but like much of libertarian philosophy, it only works if everyone is on the same side and no one breaks the rules. The Republic, of course, made sure that no one violated the Second Amendment by passing laws that permitted only Liberty Party members to own guns.

"Stay there," Tinsley says quietly, "and don't tell anyone else what you've found. I'm on my way." Then he clicks off and scrambles toward the nearby ladder.

Coyote Base 9.27.2300 (12.19.2296 rel.) 1932 GMT

"Good news, people," Bernie Cayle calls out as he marches down the shuttle ramp. "I've finished testing the plant samples, and we're in luck . . . right-handed amino acids."

He expects a reaction from the rest of the advance team; not getting one, he stops at the bottom of the ramp, looks around. Forty-Seven Ursae Majoris is setting behind the western horizon, casting a wan twilight radiance across the marsh. Bear has risen high in the dark purple sky, its ring plane a silver spike across the heavens. A shallow pool of light from an electric lantern surrounds the camp site, throwing shadows from the dome tents that have been erected. Now that the sun is going down, the wind has picked up; the evening is cool, and Bernie regrets having left his parka inside the shuttle.

Jim Levin sits on a storage container, tending the campfire with a stick. Kim Newell stands a few feet away, hands thrust within her parka. Like Jim, she's also staring up at the shuttle; noting her irate expression, Bernie walks out from beneath the spacecraft, looks in the direction she's gazing.

Tom Shapiro is seated on the shuttle's port wing, his legs dangling over its edge, the upper hatch open behind him. Another lantern is propped on the wing next to him, and within its glow Bernie can see Shapiro's handiwork. Where once *URSS Jesse Helms* and the URS flag had been stenciled on the fuselage is now a broad red swatch, and above it Shapiro has painted a single word: *Plymouth*.

Noticing Bernie for the first time, the First Officer grins down at the biochemist. "Like it? Might as well make it official before we return." Then he looks at his co-pilot. "Or do you still want history to record that the first ship to land on Coyote was called the *Jesse Helms*?"

Newell gives him a sullen glare. "As if my opinion matters. . . ."

"If you want to add your objection to the official log, go ahead and do so." Shapiro reseals the paint can, then drops the wet brush to the ground below. "But I bet you can't tell me who Jesse Helms was."

Newell scowls, but says nothing as she turns away. Wrapping his arms around himself, Bernie follows her to the campsire. "If it makes any difference," he murmurs, "I don't know who he was either."

She opens a food container and pulls out a ration pack. The upper hatch creaks softly as Shapiro closes it behind him. "That's not the issue. I just

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don't like seeing the flag painted over. Maybe you guys are D.I.s, but I was raised to be a patriotic citizen. . . ."

"So was I." Levin doesn't look up from the fire. "But the flag I grew up with had fifty stars, not just one." He hesitates, then adds, "And I'd thank you not to refer to me as a D.I. in the future."

Bernie smiles to himself. The fact that Coyote has passed a subtle yet crucial test of its habitability has gone unnoticed by these people. If his tests of the plant samples had shown them to have a left-handed genetic structure, any attempt to colonize Coyote would have been doomed; none of its vegetation could have been safely consumed, nor could any Earth crops have been successfully cultivated from native soil. Theoretically, the odds of Coyote's indigenous lifeforms having dextro-configured amino acids were fifty-fifty, yet this was something no one could have determined in advance. The universe had rolled the dice in their favor; in the face of such fortune, politics was trivial.

"I don't know about you, but I think this is a great place for a settlement." He reaches into the container and finds another ration pack. The compressed brown square inside is unappetizing, but it's the closest thing they have to food right now; he tears open the plastic wrapper with his teeth, digs out the fruit bar. "The soil is loaded with nitrogen . . . notice how dark it is? And that creek over there has fresh water. . . ."

"Good for farming," Levin says, and Bernie nods. "Still think we should have landed elsewhere?"

"I didn't say we . . ."

"What's to eat?" Shapiro tramps down the ramp. Much to Bernie's surprise, he's carrying his parka. "Thought you might need this," he says, tossing the coat to him. "Don't want to catch cold."

"Thanks." Bernie catches the parka, pulls it around his shoulders. Twilight has faded and now night is settling in. Bear outshines all but the most brilliant stars: like autumn moonlight back on Earth, only many times brighter. He gazes up at the superjovian. "First night on Coyote," he says, thinking out loud. "Damn. Still can't believe we're really here. . . ."

"Likewise." Jim Levin stands up, opens the container he's been using for a seat. "In fact, I think it's time for a celebration."

"I second the motion." Shapiro replies, watching as Levin pulls out the bottle of champagne. He fishes in the pocket of his parka, pulls out a utility knife. "It doesn't have a corkscrew, but you might be able to . . ."

Suddenly, from somewhere in the night, a scream.

It ripples across the dark marsh, a high-pitched shriek that sounds like an animal having its throat cut. It sustains for a few moments, then diminishes as if swallowed by the tall grass.

No one says anything. For a few moments, everyone freezes in place, staring into the darkness just beyond the dim glow of the firelight.

"What the hell was. . . ?" Newell begins.

They hear it again: another howl, as insane as the one before, yet louder this time. Closer. . . .

"I've heard roosters that sound like that." Levin puts down the champagne bottle, picks up a lantern. "Maybe it was a boid."

"A what?" Shapiro puts the knife back in his pocket . . . then, apparently thinking better of it, pulls it out again. "If that's a bird, it's a big one."

"Not a bird . . . a boid." Levin holds the lantern high as he turns around, searching for the source of the sound. "A monster from the Prince Rupurt

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books . . . sort of like a giant chicken, only with a bad attitude. My kids have been reading them."

Again, the weird cry . . . only this time, barely a few moments later, they hear it repeated from behind, as if it's been echoed. Yet there're no nearby hills to reflect the sound; Bernie instantly knows there must be another creature nearby.

He's not the only one to reach this conclusion. "That's no chicken, and I don't like this one bit." Shapiro turns to the others, snaps his fingers. "Okay, everyone, back in the ship."

Levin glances back at him. "You've got to be kidding. This could be our first chance to . . ."

"And it could be our last chance, too . . . and put down that light! It might be attracting them." Shapiro looks at Newell. "Kim, grab the fire extinguisher and put out the fire. Bernie, Jim, get whatever you can carry and move it inside. Leave the tents . . . they'll take too much time to take down. C'mon, hustle."

Levin reluctantly lowers the lantern, switches it off. "You don't think you're overreacting a little, do you?"

"If you'd like to stay out here tonight . . . no, forget I said that. We're not taking that risk." Shapiro bends to grab the handles of an equipment case. "That's an order, Dr. Levin. We'll have our drink once we're aboard."

Bernie shares a look with Levin. Both of them have had their scientific curiosity aroused; until now, the most they've seen of Coyote's inhabitants have been brief glimpses of hawk-like flying creatures and small brown animals that quickly vanish into the tall grass. This is an opportunity to see another native creature in its native habitat; as the survey team's biologists, this is what they were sent down here to discover and examine. Yet Bernie can't deny that what they just heard makes the bristles on his scalp feel as if they're standing on end.

Jim shrugs, picks up the container upon which he's been sitting. "So long as we're still drinking champagne tonight."

"Don't worry. You'll get another chance." Lugging the case, Shapiro heads for the *Plymouth*. "Boid or no boid, we're here to stay."

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"No, I think you did the right thing," Lee says. "But you say you haven't seen anything?"

"Not yet, skipper." Shapiro's voice comes through the speaker above the com station. "We put out the fire, but Dr. Levin insists we leave one lantern outside to see if we can draw it closer. So far, nothing. I'm going to post a watch, though, just to be sure."

Lee shifts uneasily in his seat. Although he hasn't said so, he's half-inclined to order the First Officer to bring his team home; he's all too aware that they're unarmed, ill-equipped to fend off a potentially dangerous inhabitant. Yet what would be the point? Even if the *Helms*—or rather the *Plymouth,* he reminds himself—had landed elsewhere on the planet, it's unlikely that the situation would be any different. Sooner or later, they're going to have to deal with whatever's down there.

"Very well," he says. "Stay in the ship until tomorrow morning, then see if you can find any tracks . . . but keep your people close to the shuttle." He

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glances at the chronometer. "Unless we hear different from you, we'll proceed with our schedule. *Wallace* launches at oh-six-hundred tomorrow and it should be on the ground by twelve hundred. I'll make sure the first group is armed."

"We copy, sir. We're looking forward to seeing them." The transmission is becoming scratchy as *Alabama* passes out of radio range from Coyote Base. "We'll let you know if anything comes up."

"Very good, *Plymouth*. *Alabama* out." Lee switches off, then turns to the crewman seated next to him. "Remain at this post," he says quietly, "and monitor this channel whenever we pass over the landing site. If you hear anything, notify me at once. Understood?"

"Yes sir." Swenson stifles a yawn as she adjusts her headset, then reaches for the coffee bulb clipped above her console. Lee gives her a pat on the shoulder, then unbuckles himself from his seat and pushes away from the com station.

The command center is nearly empty. Only a few crew members remain at their stations; the others are either helping the first load of colonists prepare to leave or are trying to get a few hours of sleep. Indeed, Lee could use some rest himself; his eyes feel grainy, his temples tight with a mild headache. He's been on duty for nearly twenty hours now, and he tries to remind himself that he won't be much good to anyone if he's exhausted. But he's also aware that, if something were to go wrong with the survey mission, it'll probably happen within the first twenty-four hours.

And besides, there's a couple of important matters that need to be settled. . . .

As the captain pulls himself along a ceiling rail toward his chair, the hub access hatch opens. Looking around, Lee watches as Colonel Reese glides into the compartment, accompanied by one of his men—Schmidt, if he remembers his name correctly. This is the first time Reese has been allowed to visit the flight deck, yet he somehow behaves as if he's in command; if he could walk right now, he'd probably swagger. Once again, Lee finds himself offended by the colonel's arrogance, although he's careful not to let it show.

"You wanted to see me, Captain?" Reese asks.

"Yes, I do. Thanks for coming on such short notice." Lee grasps the arm of his chair, pivots around to seat himself. "I expect you and your men have been keeping yourselves busy."

"Yes, sir, we have." Reese reaches up to grasp the ceiling rail. "We've been helping load cargo aboard the *Wallace,* as you've requested."

"Thank you. I'm sure my exec appreciates your assistance." Lee pulls a pad from his breast pocket, opens it to touch its screen. Through the windows, the daylight side of Coyote coasts into view: a vast swatch of brown, laced by the complex veins of its river system. It's a spectacular vista, but Lee barely notices it as he studies the pad. "I see you're scheduled to ride down on the *Plymouth* once it returns from the base camp."

"The *Plymouth*?" Reese exchanges a look with Schmidt. "You mean the *Helms,* don't you?"

"No, I mean the *Plymouth*. My first officer has taken the liberty of rechristening it. I suspect Mr. Tinsley will do the same with the *Wallace*. He's got a good sense of humor, so I suspect he'll want to call it the *Mayflower*." Lee allows himself a wry grin. "Or at least that's my suggestion."

"And I suppose you intend to rename this ship the *Jolly Roger*. . . ."

"No. *Alabama* is fine with me." Lee doesn't look up from the pad. "I'm reassigning you and your men from the *Plymouth* to Mr. Tinsley's ship, what-

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ever he wants to call it. You'll accompany the first group of colonists . . . if you don't have any objections, that is."

Silence. Even without looking at him, Lee can tell he's caught the colonel by surprise. "Furthermore, I'm instructing Mr. Balis to release your weapons to you as soon as you've reached Coyote Base, and to supply you with whatever further firearms you may wish to request. I want you to be fully prepared as soon as you step off the shuttle. Do you understand, Colonel?"

A reticent pause. Lee gazes directly at Reese. Although the colonel's face remains stolid, there's a certain glint in his eyes. Behind him, Schmidt is trying not to gloat. "I see," Reese says at last. "You've found something down there, haven't you?"

"Maybe. We don't know yet. The survey team heard something that doesn't sound right, and I don't want to take any chances." Lee folds the pad, puts in back in his pocket. "My people could probably take care of any situation . . . most of them are former military, so they've received weapons training . . . but I doubt any of them have pulled a trigger outside a boot-camp firing range. Your guys are combat vets. When it comes to protecting lives, I'd rather have experienced men on the ground."

"I see your point." Reese remains taciturn. "Good thinking."

Lee folds his hands in his lap, stares back at him. "I can imagine what you're thinking, Colonel. If your men are armed, you can stage an insurrection. Take control of Coyote Base, and be in a position to dictate terms of surrender before I arrive on the last shuttle." Reese's expression doesn't change, and Lee shakes his head. "Even if you did that, it wouldn't do you much good. First, you won't have anywhere to go . . . *Alabama* will be stripped to the bulkheads, and I've already told you that we don't have enough fuel for a return flight. Second, five men can't control ninety-seven people for very long. Not unless you're willing to shoot anyone who disagrees with you, and in this case you'd kill just about everyone."

Now Schmidt has looked away. "Go on," Reese says. "I'm listening."

"You've got an opportunity to do some good. These people need protection . . . I'm giving you that chance. I'll tell you now, whatever government we form down there won't be anything like the Republic . . . but I also promise that you can have a place in it. If you're willing to put aside your differences, that is."

Reese takes a deep breath. He gazes out the windows, pensive as he studies the planet far below. In those few moments, he looks less like a military officer than a man weighing a difficult decision. Political ideology against more pragmatic questions of survival. "There won't be . . . I mean, my men won't be held for trial, will they?"

Has this been his major concern all along? "No, sir, they won't," Lee says. "They've done nothing wrong. So far as I'm concerned, you were following orders. We're starting with a clean slate."

"Thank you, sir." For a moment, Reese almost looks grateful. He looks over his shoulder at Schmidt. "Sergeant, you've heard all this. What do you think?"

"Not that we have much choice, but . . ." The soldier shrugs. "I think we can live with it, sir."

Reese nods, turns back to Lee. "Then I accept your offer. We won't take any action against your people if they won't turn against us." A moment of hesitation, then he offers his hand. "A clean slate."

Lee smiles, accepts the colonel's handshake. It may not be friendship, but at least it's a cessation of hostilities. "I'm glad we have that settled," Lee says. "Now there's one more problem we have to deal with."

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Coyote Base 9.29.2300 (12.21.2296 rel.) 1332 GMT

The sudden roar of engines from the opposite side of the camp draws Jorge's attention. He looks up from the tent stake he's driving into the soft ground just in time to see the *Wallace*—now rechristened the *Mayflower*—ascending into the afternoon sky upon its VTOL jets. A hot blast rips across the meadow; everywhere around him, colonists pause in their labors to cup their hands over their ears and watch the shuttle as it lifts off for its final rendezvous with the *Alabama*.

Jorge turns back to the tent beside which he's kneeling. Two more whacks of his hammer, then he grasps the half-buried stake and shakes it to make sure that it's firm. It's been many years since the last time he went camping, and he's surprised at how much he remembers. Standing up again, he brushes dirt off his knees, then slowly walks around the red and white-striped plastic dome, making sure that all the guylines are taut. The tent is smaller than he expected; it's hard to imagine how his family will be able to squeeze in here, but it will have to do until permanent shelters are built.

Satisfied with his efforts, he turns to gaze across the meadow. Thick brown smoke rises from controlled fires set to clear away the chest-high grass, while tents are being erected in a tight cluster around *Plymouth*'s original landing site. A few dozen yards away, a couple of men dig a communal firepit in the center of the camp; Jorge watches as one of them pauses to lean heavily against the handle of his shovel, his bare back glistening with sweat as he gasps for breath. It'll be awhile before anyone becomes fully acclimated to Coyote's thin air; already he's seen a few folks become sick to the stomach from overexerting themselves. Farther away, near the edge of the campsite, he can hear another group digging latrines; Jorge hopes that they erect tarps around them, or he'll never be able to persuade Marie to go to the bathroom. . . .

Remembering his daughter, he tucks the hammer in his belt, walks away from his tent to search for her. When he last saw her, she had gone off with Rita to gather firewood. Corporal Boone, one of the URS soldiers, was supposed to lead a foraging party into the grasslands; Captain Lee had made a firm order that no one was to leave camp without an armed escort. Yet that had been several hours ago, and although he had seen many of the younger children playing tag around the tents, none of them had been Marie.

"Hey, Papa. . . ?"

Jorge turns to see Carlos walking toward him. Not surprisingly, Wendy and Chris are with him. They've become a triumvirate during the last few days; where one is, the other two are not far behind. David and Barry are part of the pack, too, but they seem to have been subtly pushed off to one side, assuming subordinate roles in the social pecking order kids set up among themselves.

"Dr. Levin wants to know if you're through with that." Carlos points to the hammer slung from Jorge's belt. "He also wants to know if . . ."

"I can help him with his tent." Jorge grins as he wipes sweat from his brow. For as long as he's known Jim, he's never been much of an outdoorsman. "I'll see if he needs a hand, sure." He glances at Chris. "So why aren't you helping your old man?"

Chris shrugs offhandedly. "I was with them," he says, as if that explains everything.

Jorge looks back at Carlos. "And what've you been doing? I thought you were supposed to be fetching water."

"We did that already."

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Great. Teenagers on the loose. Next thing he knows, he'll have to set curfew hours. Right now, though, he's more concerned about the whereabouts of Marie and Rita. "Have you seen Mama and your sister lately?"

"Sure. They're right over there, stacking wood." Carlos points in the general direction of the *Plymouth*. "I hear we're going to have a bonfire tonight, after Captain Lee gets here."

That's the first Jorge has heard of this. Sometime later this afternoon, *Alabama*'s cargo and hab modules are scheduled to be airdropped to the camp site; indeed, they should be jettisoned from the ship just about now. By early evening, the *Mayflower* will have returned to Coyote Base, bringing down Captain Lee and the close-out crew. No one had said anything about a party, yet it only makes sense that there would be some sort of celebration: it's the first night everyone from the *Alabama* will be together on the new world. Perhaps they'll finally break out the rest of the booze. . . .

"Maybe so, but that doesn't mean you guys don't have work to do." Jorge musters the full force of paternal authority. "The sooner we set up camp, the sooner we'll all be able to goof off."

Properly admonished, Carlos looks down while Chris bites his lip. Only Wendy seems unperturbed; she absently gazes at the camp growing around them, as if all this work is little of her concern. Again, Jorge finds himself wondering about her. Nearly two weeks after having met her for the first time, he still hasn't met her parents. . . .

"So, Wendy," he says, "where're your folks?"

"My dad?" She smiles at him. "He's up there. On the ship."

"Really?" He vaguely recalls her telling him that her father was a member of *Alabama*'s crew. A life-support engineer. Probably a member of the close-out team. "And your mother. . . ?" She frowns, looks away; Carlos decides not to press further. "So what's his name? I'd like to meet him sometime."

"Eric Gunther." Wendy smiles at him once more. "He's coming down tonight, after he gets through with the captain."

URSS *Alabama* 9.29.00 (12.21.2296 rel.) 17.59 GMT

Hand poised above the toggle switch marked *C7-Jet,* Lee watches the chronometer as it counts down the last few seconds. As it flashes to 18:00, he snaps the switch. There's a sudden, hard thump from somewhere above him; he glances out the window in time to see Module C7 detach from the ring. Leaving behind a phosphorescent trail of debris, the jettisoned module falls away from the *Alabama,* recessed thrusters flaring briefly as its internal guidance system aligns it for atmospheric entry. Farther away, he can just make out Modules C6 and C5: tiny cylinders coasting toward the planet. Although he can no longer see them, C4 and C3 should be aerobraking in a few minutes. With any luck, all five modules will safely enter Coyote's atmosphere and parachute to soft landing close to the base camp, if not right on target.

"That's the last one," Lee says, speaking into his headset.

"We copy, skipper," Tinsley replies. "We're ready to go."

"Give me a minute. There're a few things I need to take care of." Lee smiles. "Don't leave without me."

A short laugh. The XO is down in H5 along with the rest of the close-out crew, waiting to board the *Mayflower*. "Wouldn't dream of it, sir. Just remember we've got a party tonight."

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"I haven't forgotten." Lee clicks off, then pushes himself over to another console. He presses a row of buttons; the window shutters slowly descend, blocking his view of the planet. He pulls a plastic sheet across the console, then turns to gaze around the compartment.

The command deck is deserted now, dark save for a few random lights and a single ceiling fluorescent; all the consoles have been covered, the nav table vacant of any holographic images. As soon as the AI detects that *Mayflower* has left its docking cradle, it'll fire the ship's secondary engines and automatically pilot the ship to a higher orbit where it will function as little more than a weather satellite. Only the hibernation modules haven't been jettisoned; within them are the biostasis dewars containing animal embryos: sheep, goats, chickens, geese, even a few dogs and cats. Lee has decided that the livestock is safer in orbit until the colony is well established, at which time one of the shuttles will return to bring them down to Coyote.

Yet there's another duty the ship will perform in their absence. Lee coasts over to the helm, pushes aside its cover. He taps a memorized code into the keypad, activating a program he's written into the astrogation subsystem. He studies a screen, watching as the ship's telescope rotates outward, facing the stars. Satisfied, he shuts down the station, covers the console once more. Just a little extra insurance no one else needs to know about. . . .

He should go below now. As commanding officer, he's fulfilled his obligation to be the last man to leave ship. Instead, Lee glides over to his chair, pushes himself into it. One last job that needs to be done. . . .

Alone in the darkness, Lee waits, just as many years ago he lay awake in the desert night, waiting for the coyote to come to him.

He hears a metallic creak from somewhere behind him: the hatch being pushed open. Yet he doesn't turn, not even when he detects the soft movement of someone entering the deck.

"Hello, Mr. Gunther," he says. "I've been expecting you."

Lee rotates his chair. Eric Gunther hovers near the nav table, grasping a ceiling rail with his left hand. Although Lee can't see him clearly, the glow of the instrument panels is reflected upon the barrel of the .38 automatic in his right hand.

Gunther actually seems surprised. "You knew?"

"You'd eventually find a way to get me alone . . . if not here, then down there." Lee pauses. "I hoped you might change your mind, but when a gun turned up missing I knew it had to be taken by you. When I saw that you volunteered for the close-out, I decided to make this meeting a little easier."

"I don't understand. How could you have. . . ?"

"Mr. Gillis figured it out first." Lee rests his hands upon the armrests, making sure that they're in plain view. "He left a note for me before he died, informing me that the ISA had placed you aboard the ship as a security precaution. Your mission was to destroy the ship if it was hijacked, but of course that didn't happen. . . . Gillis was revived from hibernation three months after launch instead of you. There was a mistake and your cell assignments were switched. An error on someone else's part . . . or at least so he believed."

Lee slowly shakes his head. "But it wasn't a mistake, was it? At the last minute, you made that switch yourself, didn't you?"

Gunther's confusion fades into anger; the gun inches upward. "It doesn't matter. You're guilty of treason against the Republic. . . ."

"Oh, but it does matter." Lee folds his hands together. "After I found his

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note, I asked the AI why his cell . . . originally your cell . . . had been programmed to open three months after launch. That's when I discovered your orders to destroy *Alabama* if the launch orders weren't confirmed by the president. Gillis discovered this long before I did . . . but what he neglected to ask was exactly who had switched the cell assignments. He assumed it was an accident . . . but it wasn't."

He points toward Gunther. "According to your crew profile, you were one of the mission candidates, but you didn't make the first cut. My guess is that, when the ISA offered you this assignment, you accepted because it would bump you back into the mission. In fact, you went so far as to make sure that your daughter Wendy was brought aboard as a colonist. You figured that you'd never be revived, but since you didn't want to take any chances . . ."

"Leave her out of this."

"As you like it." Lee gently nods. "Anyway, since you weren't able to delete the AI program, you picked another crewmember at random and had him take your place in the rigged cell. As a member of the life-support crew, you were able to alter the cell assignments. So Les was the one who got the dirty end of the stick, and you . . ." He shrugs. "Well, now here we are."

"And here we are." Now the gun is pointed straight at him. "For treason against the United Republic of America, I . . ."

A soft metallic click from somewhere behind him: a rifle's safety being disengaged.

Gunther's eyes widen as he recognizes the sound. "Thank you, Gill," Lee says quietly. "I think I can handle this."

"If you're sure, Captain." Reese's voice is a low murmur from the shadows behind Gunther.

Lee nods in his direction, then looks back at Gunther. "Colonel Reese is standing about eight feet behind you. If you fire, he fires next . . . and even if you don't fire, I imagine the Colonel would be able to take you down."

The gun trembles in Gunther's hand. His eyes shift nervously, moving from Lee to the man he can't see behind him. "Colonel Reese, you're with the Service. You're on our side. You can't . . ."

"Sorry, son." Reese remains an invisible presence. "Things have changed."

"Colonel Reese is still loyal to the Republic," Lee says, "but he's accepted the reality of our situation. The Republic is forty-six light-years from here. Government orders no longer apply . . . his, yours, mine, no one's." He opens his hands, spreads them open. "You want to execute me as a traitor? Guilty as charged. But what point is killing me going to serve?"

The gun wavers, pulls away from Lee. But now there's hopelessness in Gunther's eyes, the empty withdrawal of a man who has lost everything he has come to believe in. The barrel begins to move toward his head . . .

"Don't do it, Eric." Lee keeps his voice low and steady. "Think about Wendy. She's going to need you."

Gunther rapidly blinks. "When she . . . when she finds out . . . I mean, about Gillis . . ."

"She doesn't have to know." Lee shakes his head. "As far as everyone else is concerned, Les was revived by accident. Everything we've talked about stays here. From now on, we're starting with a clean slate."

He holds out his hand, beckoning for the ensign to give him the gun. "Come on, Eric. We've only got a hundred and three people. We're going to need every . . ."

The gun whips toward Lee, the barrel pointed straight at his eyes. "Long live the Republic! God bless. . . !"

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His body is punched forward even before Lee hears the muted concussion of Reese's rifle. Gunther's arms splay outward; his finger convulsively squeezes the trigger. There's a single gunshot; somewhere behind him, glass shatters. For an instant, Lee thinks the bullet has hit a window. Yet the decompression alarms don't sound, and now Gunther's body pitches toward him, red globules of blood spewing upward from his back.

Lee catches the crewman in his arms. Gunther stares up at him, his breath coming in ragged gasps. From the corner of his eye, Lee sees his gun tumbling away.

Gunther stares up at him, his mouth twisted in agony. Then his eyes, still filled with hatred, grow cold.

Lee's still holding him as Reese emerges from the shadows. He silently regards both men, then he slides open the rifle, ejecting the next flechette in the chamber. "Sorry," he says quietly. "No other way."

Lee doesn't answer. He waits until he feels Gunther's body become limp within his arms. "It was an accident," he says. "Something went wrong during close-out."

He looks up at Reese. "Better that way, don't you think?"

Coyote Base 9.29.00 (12.21.2296 rel.) 2218 GMT

"There was no way to save him. He was in the ring corridor, trying to shut the inner hatch to C6. No one knew he was there. He had gone back on his own initiative to check the modules. So when C6 was jettisoned, he . . . well, we couldn't even retrieve his body."

Charred black wood hisses and snaps, tossing sparks high into the cold night. All around him, silence; men and women stand or sit in a circle around the bonfire, huddled within their parkas, hoods pulled up over their heads. Tonight was supposed to be meant for a celebration; instead it's become a wake. Of all the ways Lee imagined the first day on the new world would end, this was not one of them.

Reese regards him from the other side of the fire. The colonel has said little since the *Mayflower* landed, and he has remained silent while the captain told the story of how Eric Gunther died: heroically, in the line of duty. All he has to do is open his mouth, proclaim that everything Lee has said was a lie, and the colony would be . . . well, perhaps not destroyed, but crippled at the very least, for without faith in their leader the colony would flounder, torn between feelings of loyalty and betrayal. And it would be so easy for Reese to do this. Just a few words. . . .

Yet Reese only nods, ever so slightly; no one else notices the look that passes between the two men. Wendy Gunther, sitting in her tent being comforted by her friends and a couple of adults, need never know the truth.

Somewhere out in the darkness, far beyond the glow of the lanterns set up around camp, a hideous cry ripples across the grasslands. Several people glance in its direction; others visibly shudder. No one has yet seen a boid, as the creatures have come to be called, yet their footprints have been found in soft mud: three-toed avian tracks nearly eighteen inches in length, each several feet apart from the other, suggesting a large flightless bird of some sort. Reese's men have set up automatic machine guns around the camp's perimeter; they're programmed to fire upon anything that enters range of their infrared motion detectors, and Tom Shapiro reported that the

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guns fired briefly a couple of times last night. The boids have kept their distance since then, yet the soldiers continue their patrol.

Lee waits until the boid has quieted down, then goes on. "We were supposed to break out the liquor tonight, have a party, but . . . well, perhaps that wouldn't be appropriate at this time." Murmurs of agreement. "By Earth calendar, in four days it'll be Christmas. Maybe we should wait till then. But I would like to say a few words I've been saving for now."

As he speaks, Lee unbuttons his parka. "Just before we left Earth, just before I boarded the shuttle to *Alabama,* I had a final meeting with Ben Aldrich, the Launch Supervisor at GSC. On behalf of his team, Ben gave me something he wanted to be taken here. I didn't want it, but I took it anyway, and I've kept it in my cabin until we were ready to board the *Mayflower*."

From an inside pocket, Lee pulls a plastic-wrapped object: a URA flag, its single star visible through its transparent pouch. As he pulls out the folded flag, he observes the reactions of the people gathered around the fire. Loathing, respect, wonder, fear, contempt . . . but never pride, nor love.

"Until a few hours ago, I meant to use the occasion to burn this thing." A sharp hiss from someone in the back of the crowd. "Like many of you, I was once loyal to the United Republic of America. Like many of you, I was betrayed by its government. I hated what became of my country, and. . ."

He stops, shakes his head. "No. I've never hated my country, nor the people who live in it. I only despise the things a few selfish men did to destroy America. In the last few days, though, I've come to realize that my opinion isn't the only one that matters. Many among you still honor this symbol. If I were to burn it, they would be offended . . . but if I were to raise it on a mast, not only would it be an insult to everyone who feels as I do, but the sight of it there would also betray the memories of all the men and women who sacrificed their freedom, even their lives, so that we could come to this place."

He lets the moment linger, allowing everyone to think about what he has said. The flag weighs heavily in his hand; with a casual flick of the wrist, he could easily toss it into the flames. The flag is more than two hundred years old, its fabric brittle with age; the fire would consume it within seconds. Some of these people would cheer, while others . . .

"So I'll do neither. I intend to keep it as a reminder of our past, for better or worse. I won't burn it, and I won't bury it, and I won't hide it . . . but neither will I ever allow it to be raised above our colony. It's part of history. Let it stay that way."

"Amen," someone says. Others mutter the same in agreement, although a few shake their heads. Through the flames, Lee catches a glimpse of Gill Reese; the colonel has turned away, shouldering past those around him as he quietly departs the meeting. Once again, Lee realizes that although he and Reese have put aside their difference, they will never be friends.

"By much the same token, I've given some thought to what we should call our colony. . . ."

The crowd quiets down once more. As leader of the expedition, this is his prerogative. "I'm reminded of what became of America, and who was responsible for its demise. Those people took a great word . . . a fine word . . . and corrupted its meaning until it stood for something different. Tonight, I want to take it back."

He hesitates, takes a deep breath. "Liberty. The name of this place is Liberty." ❍

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

THE AMBER SPYGLASS
by Philip Pullman
Knopf, $19.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-679-87926-9

Pullman's trilogy, "His Dark Materials," comes to a conclusion in this book, which proves again that a YA market niche does not preclude—in fact, may even encourage—more thoughtful examination of the Big Questions than most adult SF gets around to.

The previous books (*The Golden Compass* and *The Subtle Knife*) introduced a world parallel to our own, in which every human is paired with a *daemon*, an externalization of the soul in the form of an animal companion. The two protagonists are Lyra and Will, misfit children of roughly the same preadolescent age from two different parallel versions of present-day England, who are thrown together after their lives are disrupted by forces beyond their control. In the process, each has come into possession of, and learned to use, the magical devices for which the first two books are named. (One could argue whether the devices are magical or para-scientific, since the author drops hints of an explanation in terms of advanced physics.)

Much against their will, the two young protagonists have come to the attention of the all-powerful Church that rules Lyra's world. The Church leaders believe that Lyra is destined to recapitulate the story of Eve, bringing about a new Fall in a new Eden. The Church throws all its forces into an effort to prevent this, including sending a priest, who has stored up penance so as to gain complete absolution in advance, to murder a scientist who has helped Lyra (and who discovers the magical instrument to which the title of this volume refers), and who has entered a parallel world where she finds a race of creatures who have turned themselves into organic motorcycles. In the process, she has discovered a world-shattering crisis without apparent solution.

But Lyra and Will have plans of their own, that include an escape through the most fearsome of all the worlds the subtle knife allows them to enter. This is the realm of the dead, which they can only get to by leaving behind their daemons—a sacrifice so terrible it almost stops them from following through with their plans. But Lyra's plan requires the journey, and Pullman turns it into a striking vision of a world after death that differs from the promises of all the major western religions and yet remains fully believable. In the end they emerge to join the final battle, where the forces of good are successful—but at a cost.

Pullman has remarked that his purpose in writing the book was in part to underline the obsolescence of the metaphor of a "kingdom of heaven," and he drives home this point with a vengeance in some of the final scenes. While some readers (especially those who buy the book for young readers without finding out what's between the covers) will undoubtedly be shocked by his frank repudiation of religion, others will be glad to see a solid counterweight to the overt proselytizing of Narnia and similar children's classics.

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Pullman's worlds are vividly imagined, peopled by characters who embody the whole range of humanity, and packed with incidents that sear themselves into the reader's memory. "His Dark Materials" is one of the most striking imaginative edifices of the modern era; I cannot recommend it highly enough.

THE COLLECTED STORIES
by Arthur C. Clarke
Tor, $29.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-312-87821-4

This one ought to be a no-brainer; all of Clarke's short fiction to date, in a single volume. That almost automatically makes this book one of the cornerstones of any serious SF library. The "almost" is in recognition of the fact that serious SF libraries are likely already to have the bulk of these stories in previous collections of Clarke's work, and that Sir Arthur's output of short fiction has fallen off significantly in the last couple of decades. But it's good to have them all together, in chronological order, with a few words from the author to put them in perspective.

There are obviously any number of valid ways to read this kind of collection, although very few readers are likely to start at page one and go all the way to the finish. This is a book that rewards the browser. I found myself skipping the stories I'm most familiar with to look at things I hadn't read before—the very early pieces and some of the most recent ones, in particular.

This very selective reading (the volume offers 966 pages of story) led to some unsurprising conclusions. Clarke's technical story-telling ability improved considerably over the first decade or so of his career, but has stayed pretty much on a level (a very high level) since the early fifties. And even the earliest stories here show a thematic relation to his mature work, and a fondness for certain tropes. One in particular—setting the reader up to draw the "obvious" conclusion from the historical or cultural context of a story, then surprising him with the opposite—is in fact central to some of Clarke's best known stories: e.g. "History Lesson," "The Nine Billion Names of God," and many of the *Tales from the White Hart*. It also gives him an easy method for turning out half-serious squibs such as "Quarantine," which appeared in *Asimov's* in 1977.

While Clarke no longer seems much interested in the short story, some of the best work in the book is from the last hundred pages. This is perhaps as it ought to be; a writer likes to think he's learned something over the years. "A Meeting with Medusa," from 1971, shows all the earmarks of his best work, including a quiet mastery of nuts-and-bolts science and technology that effectively grounds the story's glimpse of the strange in recognizable reality. "The Hammer of God," later expanded to novel length, has similar strengths; had it been published in 1950-something instead of 1992, it would be considered a classic.

The title of this volume is probably a sign that Clarke doesn't foresee much likelihood of a return to the field. Still, the final piece, "Improving the Neighborhood," commissioned as the first piece of fiction to be published in *Nature*, suggests that the opportunity to score a historic first might draw him out. Meanwhile, here's a perfect chance to remind ourselves once more just how good Clarke can be, and how much he has given to our field.

JUPITER
by Ben Bova
Tor, $ 24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-312-87217-8

Bova takes us to a moderately near future, with a story set primar-

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ily on a scientific satellite in orbit around Jupiter. This kind of work is Bova's forte: solid extrapolation from current science supporting a straightforward plot.

The protagonist is Grant Archer, a young astrophysicist from a society where a fundamentalist religious movement styling itself New Morality has taken power. In exchange for a full scholarship at Harvard, Archer has signed up to perform his four years of Public Service (an obligation imposed on all citizens who finish high school) directly after college, at a site of the government's choosing. To his horror, he's ordered to Thomas Gold Station, several million miles away from Earth—and from his new fiancée. Worst of all, the two years' round trip transit time doesn't count toward his obligation.

Archer's situation is complicated when, before his departure, the New Morality attempts to recruit him as an agent to report any suspicious activity on Gold Station—in particular, any attempt to find life in the Jovian atmosphere. And, in fact, almost as soon as he arrives, he becomes aware that secrets are being kept from him by the other scientific staff. In due course he learns that not only are the scientists working on a plan to discover life on Jupiter, they have already launched one partly successful expedition into the atmosphere—and that another is in the works.

Eventually Archer is drafted to join the second expedition, and in due course they build upon the discoveries of the first. Meanwhile, in alternate chapters, we follow one of the Jovian creatures, an intelligent entity carrying on a lifestyle not unlike that of whales in our oceans. Bova generates tension by sending the Jovian on a dangerous solitary journey around the Great Red Spot, intermittently harassed by pack-hunting predators who come across much like orcas.

Everything falls together in the end, of course, with Archer contributing significantly to the denouement, and the New Morality taken down a peg. Probably the best thing in the book is Bova's convincing portrayal of a Big Science project in action, with the internal politics and social structure of Gold Station generating much of the interest of the story. To this reviewer, at least, it's more interesting than his somewhat routine Jovians—but perhaps if Bova takes this story to a second volume, the Jovians will be fleshed out more. That would be welcome; this one has more potential for sequels than most.

Recommended for readers who enjoy real science fiction, set on distant worlds, and based on plausible extrapolations from known science.

THE GRAVEYARD GAME
by Kage Baker
Harcourt, $24.00 (hc)
ISBN: 0-15-100449-8

This fourth book in Baker's history of Dr. Zeus, Inc. follows a group of immortals from the early twentieth century up to a future in which they have to decide whether or not to challenge the Company that has provided them with a reason for living.

The novel picks up when Lewis, one of the immortals, sees a person who can't possibly be there: the Botanist Mendoza, a central figure in the previous three books of the series. Mendoza has made a catastrophic error, and the Company has sentenced her to exile in the deep past. So what is she doing, dressed in nineteenth century clothing and leading a pair of horses, at one of the Company's sites in 1996? Much of the rest of the novel revolves around his attempts to solve the mystery—and to learn what really becomes of immortals who outlive their usefulness to the Company.

All this involves a fair amount of

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hugger-mugger to prevent the Company from finding out what they're doing. Baker handles this chore with a fair amount of wit and inventiveness, as she moves her characters through a number of entertaining settings, both geographical and temporal. She's obviously having a good bit of fun here; typical is the recurring bit where immortals indulge in junk-food pigouts—especially on chocolate. The changing mores of the long stretch of time over which the story takes place gives her ample opportunity for sly comment on various manifestations of political correctness in current and future societies.

The wide canvas lets her play with a wide range of adventure story tropes, as well. There's a visit to a prehistoric battlefield, where evidence of a lost race of giants turns up; a glimpse of a vast conspiracy to rule the course of civilization, disguised as a Victorian scientific society; a final chase set in a striking landscape worthy of a James Bond movie; and lots of fiddling around with the paradoxical possibilities inherent in time travel. Baker has a nice ear for dialogue, as well, and can do a nice pastiche of Victorian letter-writing style when the occasion arises.

If you're in the mood for a witty, stylish SF thriller, this one might be right up your alley. Look up the earlier installments in the series and read them all. But a word of warning—Baker's stuff has the potential to become a very pleasant addiction.

REDEMOLISHED
by Alfred Bester
ibooks, $14.95 (tp)
ISBN: 0-7434-0725-3

This volume brings together a large chunk of Bester's lesser-known fiction, as well as providing a very healthy sample of the non-fiction writing by which he earned his living in the long stretch during which he was inactive in SF.

Bester is one of those who helped drive SF through its transition from pulp entertainment to something that, at its best, can reasonably be called literature. His two novels of the fifties, *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination*, are touchstones of excellence in the genre, combining breakneck pacing with use of avant-garde techniques few other SF writers had previously attempted. His short fiction was nervous, cynical, pyrotechnical and often impossible to forget—although not always easy to like. But like him or hate him, he left an indelible stamp on the field, and was a major influence on such later writers as Samuel R. Delany and the cyberpunks.

Several of the stories here, notably the 1942 *Unknown* fantasy "Hell is Forever," show him already pushing the envelope at the height of the Golden Age. The latest stories here show him still a master of calculated outrage—as in "The Four-Hour Fugue," a 1974 *Analog* story that doesn't fit anybody's idea of formula fiction. It is a disgrace to the SF publishing business that most of Bester's fiction has been chronically out of print since the early 1960s, when he realized there was a better living to be made as a senior editor at *Holiday* magazine.

On the other hand, as several of the nonfiction pieces here indicate, Bester was growing increasingly unhappy with the science fiction ghetto as it existed in the years just before the emergence of the New Wave in the mid-sixties. One essay, originally published in the book review column of *Galaxy* in 1961, denounces the entire field as devoid of original thought or worthwhile content. Always a risk-taker, Bester poured out his wrath on the producers of workmanlike stories that conceal some trivial scientific fact from the reader until they spring it as a surprise on the final page. Another essay from

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the following month pays homage to those authors who rose above the prevailing mode: Heinlein, Sturgeon, Sheckley, Blish, Asimov—although in each case Bester shows awareness of their limitations as well as of their strengths.

Also included among the non-fiction are several interviews with several people of interest to SF readers: Heinlein, Asimov, Rex Stout, and Woody Allen. Bester was a good interviewer, with just the right touch of irreverence for his subjects to bring out the unexpected side of their personalities.

The final section of the book offers several perspectives on *The Demolished Man*, including the original prologue that ran with the novel's magazine serialization but was dropped by the book publisher to reduce its length. This is a snapshot of the history leading up to the era in which the book is set, much in the same manner as the prologue to *The Stars My Destination*, which was not cut in the book version. Also included is a brief article by Bester on the composition of *The Demolished Man*, which gives some insight into his approach to a story.

This is probably not the place for a reader unfamiliar with Bester to begin; that would be (for my money) either *The Stars My Destination* or a selection of his short stories including such classics as "Fondly Fahrenheit" and "The Men Who Murdered Mohammed." But for those who know the major works and want as much Bester as they can get, this is just the thing.

THE APE AND THE SUSHI MASTER: Cultural Reflections of a Primatologist
by Frans de Waal
Basic Books, $26.00 (hc)
ISBN: 0-465-04175-2

One of the leading experts on primate behavior, de Waal puts forth the proposition that culture, far from being the exclusive property of the human species, can be observed in the behavior of species far removed from our exalted perch on the evolutionary family tree.

By "culture," of course, de Waal means a good bit more than attendance at the opera and an interest in painting—although there have been a number of apes who've managed to produce canvases at least as interesting as those of some of their human contemporaries. The best simple definition of culture is those traits transmitted from one generation to the next by example, rather than genetic programming—although one could argue that the predisposition to culture is programmed in our genes.

Many of the insights in this volume were arrived at after Western scientists adopted the technique of identifying and watching individual animals, a method pioneered by the Japanese. De Waal cites two reasons for the delay in adopting this perfectly obvious technique: the European tradition of placing a firm barrier between humanity and the "lower" animals; and the rise of the behaviorist school of psychology, which devalued not only differences between individual animals but distinctions between species. "Rat, pigeon, monkey. . . . It doesn't matter," said B.F. Skinner, the leading behaviorist. De Waal begs to differ.

A simple and instructive counterexample is a band of macaques on the Japanese island of Koshima, who have learned to wash sweet potatoes in the ocean to give them a salty taste. These monkeys, under observation by Japanese scientists for several decades, picked up the trick from a single female of the band, who taught it to her close relatives, who spread it to the rest of the group. No monkeys anywhere else in the world have learned this trick;

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but it is nearly universal among the macaques of Koshima.

Innovation is not confined to primates, either. Among songbirds, there is often one leading singer in a neighborhood, whose songs attract the most response from the opposite sex, and are gradually imitated by other birds in the neighborhood. These birds are not averse to picking up melodies of human origin, although they often have their own ideas of how they should go: Mozart had a pet starling one of whose songs he noted down; the melody is very similar to one of the composer's own pieces, and it is unknown whether Mozart plagiarized the bird or vice versa. Another starling, owned by a researcher, liked to sing the first line of "Swanee River," but always ended the tune before the last three syllables—a musically logical melody, but fingernails on a blackboard to humans who know Stephen Foster's song.

All this is neat stuff for someone looking for an outside perspective on what it means to be human, and on what nonhuman intelligence might be like. As a bonus, de Waal is a compelling writer, with a pleasant sense of humor and an eye for the telling anecdote. This looks like one of the most valuable popular science books of the year. ○

Chat online
with your favorite authors!

Asimov's Father's Day **June 12 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
Chat about the latest anthology from Ace with: James Patrick Kelly, Jonathan Lethem, and Pamela Sargent.

Australian SF **June 26 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
Visit with Jack Dann, Cecilia Dart-Thornton, Ian Irvine, Maxine McArthur, and Sean McMullen, and discover the hottest new Australian fiction.

Critics Corner **July 10 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
Join our book reviewers for their insights and a preview of today's fiction. Paul Di Filippo, Tom Easton, and Peter Heck.

Go to **www.scifi.com/chat** or link to the chats via our home page (**www.asimovs.com**). Chats are held in conjunction with *Analog* and the Sci-fi Channel and are moderated by *Asimov's* editor, Gardner Dozois.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The big western meet of the year is coming up July 4th weekend in Portland OR. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. - Erwin S. Strauss

JUNE 2001

8–10—**AgamemCon.** For info, write: **92 Corporate Park. #C330, Irvine CA 92606.** Or phone: **(949) 235-1010** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(E-mail) orrock@ix.netcom.com. (Web) www.agamemcon.org.** Con will be held in: Burbank CA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hilton. Guests will include: Claudia Christian. Babylon 5.

8–10—**Holodiction. (02) 9311-4265. www.startrek.com.au/.** Sydney Australia. Dawson, Picardo, Russ, Wang.

8–11—**Multiverse. multivrs@vicnet.net. www.home.vicnet.net.au/~multivrsau.** Melbourne Australia. Media fans.

15–17—**ConJuration. (573) 875-0401. www.home1.gte.net/conjure.** Columbia MO. Nye, Berdak, Killough, Mayo.

15–17—**ClaveCon. clavecon@hotmail.com.** Ramada, Fanwood NJ. Archibald BonHomme. Legal aspects of SF.

15–17—**Anime Mid-Atlantic. www.animemidatlantic.com.** Holiday Inn Select, Richmond VA. Bennett, Waltrips.

15–17—**Mikkakan. http://mikkakan.gehirn.net.** Radisson Hotel, Merrimack NH. MacAvery, Nadelman. Anime.

16–17—**Trek Celebration. (913) 327-8735.** Radisson, Rosemont IL. Dawson, Phillips, Picardo. Commercial.

16–17—**Nocturnal. www.midgaard.demon.co.uk/nocturnal/3k.** Radisson Heathrow, London UK. Vampires.

17–July 27—**Clarion West. (206) 322-9083.** Seattle WA. Butler, Denton, Willis, Datlow. Writers' workshop.

22–24—**TriCon, 5607 W. 8th Ave., Kennewick WA 99336. (509) 783-9447. www.users.owt.com/rolan/tricon/.**

22–24—**ConTerpoint, Box 2823, Arlington VA 22202. www.filker.org/.** Woodfin, Rockville MD. SF folksinging.

22–24—**Monster Bash, Box 213, Ligonier PA 15658. (724) 238-6436.** Days Inn N., Pittsburgh PA. Lugosi Jr.

22–25—**Gargoyles, Box 18972, Cleveland OH 44118. (216) 832-4081 gathering2001@artchicks.com.** Los Angeles.

23–24—**Trek Expo, 2130 S. Sheridan, Tulsa OK 74129. (918) 838-3388.** Expo Center. Adam West. Commercial.

24–July 1—**Cruise Trek, Box 2038, Agoura Hills CA 91376. cruisetrek@aol.com.** Sail from Stockholm Sweden.

26–July 1—**World Boardgaming Championship, 1521 Redfield Rd., BelAir MD 21015.** Marriott, Hunt Valley MD.

28–July 1—**British SF Celebration, Box 64128, Sunnyvale CA 94088. asawyer@liv.ac.uk.** Liverpool UK. Aldiss.

29–July 1—**ConSortium, 3118 FM 528 #367, Webster TX 77598. www.con-sortium.org.** Radisson, Houston TX.

29–July 1—**AtlantiCon, Box 2136, Charlottetown PEI C1A 4K8. (800) 867-5563.** Delta PE. Takei, Prowse.

29–July 1—**Lunarevolution, 1525 Sherman Ave. #93, Denver CO 80203. (303) 675-8262.** Savannah GA. Elmore.

29–July 1—**Empire Union, 707 Kirts Blvd. #103, Troy MI 48084. www.empireunion.org.** Toledo OH. O'Reilly.

JULY 2001

5–8—**WesterCon, Box 5901, Portland OR 97228. (360) 993-2001.** Doubletrees. Powers, Glyer, Lurz, Windling.

5–8—**Origins, Box 1740, Renton WA 98057. (800) 529-3976. www.originsgameexpo.com.** Columbus OH. Gaming.

5–8—**Anime Expo, 530 Showers Dr. #7-287, Mt. View CA 94040. (626) 582-8200.** Hyatt/Westin, Long Beach CA.

6–8—**ConVergence, Box 13208, Minneapolis MN 55414. (612) 996-9224.** Radisson, Bloomington MN. M. Sheard.

6–8—**Gateway, Box 3064, Florissant MO 63032. (314) 524-3014.** Airport Hilton, St. Louis MO. Zahn, Campbell.

6–8—**Fanex, 9721 Britinay Ln., Baltimore MD 21234. (410) 665-9207.** Hunt Valley Marriott. Ackerman. Horror.

AUGUST 2001

30–Sept. 3—**Millennium PhilCon, Box 310, Huntingdon Valley PA 19006.** Philadelphia PA. WorldCon. $180.

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